

MORE HILLS TO CLIMB

An abstract of a Dissertation by

Joanne Brown

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Advisor: Ruth Doty

The dissertation is a collection of seven original short stories, each portraying a central character who struggles to climb a symbolic "hill" towards a new plateau of self-awareness or maturity. The stories are realistic, peopled with individuals cast in familiar (and frequently complementary) roles: parent and child, husband and wife, student and teacher. Although the form and narrative techniques used in this dissertation are largely conventional, the stories explore variations of those techniques: both "A Question of Charity" and "Resort" use a third-person limited point of view, although "Resort" has a larger scope, with occasional flashbacks and more interlocking tensions between its characters than "Charity." "Visiting Hours," written from an effaced narrative viewpoint, is more heavily dependent on dialogue and objective descriptive detail than the other stories. The remaining four works are told in the first person, but with variant approaches: "More Hills to Climb" is narrated by an adolescent girl whose unreliable point of view permits an ironic comment on friendship and jealousy. "Viewpoints" is the only story told in the present tense; narrated by a young woman, it is divided into four sequential but fragmented scenes, a mosaic held together by a common thematic concern with the ambiguities of motherhood. "Miss Newley" is told entirely in flashback, a memory piece. "Penelope Revisited" inverts Molly Bloom's soliloquy to probe the stream-of-consciousness reactions of a woman to her husband's infidelity.

In each story, narrative viewpoint and structure derive from character and situation. Although the stories are complete in themselves, they are intended to complement one another both thematically and structurally.

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A Dissertation
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Doctor of Arts

by
Joanne Brown
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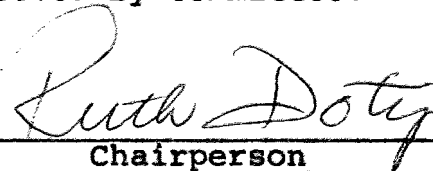
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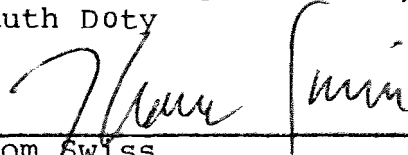
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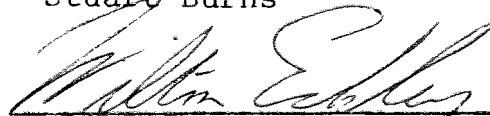
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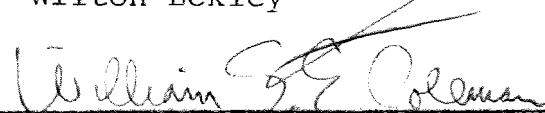
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A QUESTION OF CHARITY

When Lanny first met the child, she had been living in Germany for over a year, the bride of Second Lieutenant Grant of the United States Infantry. She had come to Germany with great apprehension; World War II had ended only ten years ago, and she carried in her mind images gleaned from newspapers and newsreels--skeletal bodies piled high behind barbed wire, sullen lines of stiff-kneed Nazis, buildings ripped by bombs. But the small Bavarian town to which her husband had been sent seemed as untouched by the horror as a postcard scene: narrow cobbled streets wound between squat pastel buildings with tiled roofs; the dome of the cathedral, ornate and glistening, stood high in the center of town; in the distance, the foothills of the Bavarian Alps ridged the horizon. The Germans she encountered in shops and restaurants were robust and friendly.

Within a day's drive were Zurich, Munich, Strasbourg-- cities whose names for her had once been only a dot on a map.

The Grants' apartment in the civilian compound was spacious and bright, nearly elegant. Its oak floors, laid in a herring bone pattern, gleamed with varnish. The furniture, although government-issue, was unexpectedly graceful, with dark satiny wood and tufted cushions. An imitation oriental rug covered the living room floor. Lanny set her wedding gifts about the rooms--crystal candy dishes and silver ashtrays on the tables, candlesticks and figurines on the bookcase.

For some months, the apartment pleased her. She took a housewifely pride in ordered cupboards, in plumped cushions and flawlessly transparent windows. But her mother had always kept a live-in maid, and Lanny had spent her college years in a dormitory; the intricacies of housekeeping began to baffle and then overwhelm her. The cupboards became gritty with spilled sugar, and the once nested pots rattled in capricious disarray. Grime flecked the windows. Gradually, the floors dulled beneath her husband's heavy army boots; a Scottish terrier they had bought in Nurnberg stained the varnish in several places.

On the dining table careless guests left rings the color of mold. Everywhere, scratches and knicks erupted like a rash. She waxed and polished with irate persistence, measuring her efforts against the day when the government assessor would inspect their quarters for damages, increasingly resentful of her domestic burden.

Finally, in the summer of their second year abroad, she hired a German woman who cleaned for Major Pearson's wife twice a week. She was to come to Lanny on Wednesdays for five Deutsch marks a day-- a dollar and a quarter, hardly an extravagance.

At first Lanny had resisted.

"Francis is a real whiz," the major's wife had said. "If she has a day for you."

"I don't know," Lanny stalled, reluctant to yield her privacy to a stranger, especially a German. "I don't think there's enough to keep her busy all day."

Mrs. Pearson patted her blue-gray hair and straightened the floppy bow at her neck. "You seem to keep yourself very busy in your little apartment. We never see you anymore at the post luncheons."

"This Francis--is she honest?"

"Oh, yes. The girl we had when we came took

everything she could lay her hands on, but Francis is as honest as a cabbage. I even trust her with my children."

The Pearson children were notoriously unruly, and Lanny reflected that the maid was unlikely to steal them, but she kept silent.

"Do you want her or not?"

Lanny decided she did. The week before the maid was to begin, she stored up tasks for Francis, setting aside the basket of ironing heaped with her husband's crumpled fatigues, buying new waxes and polishing cloths at the post exchange, ignoring with only a little difficulty the fine film of dust that settled over the apartment.

When the doorbell rang on Wednesday, she felt a swell of relief, for the maid was a few minutes late and Lanny had panicked, certain that Francis had changed her mind and equally certain now that she could no longer do without her. The dog began to yip and quiver with excitement, pushing his black nose against the crack of the door.

"Hush, Macduff," Lanny said sharply. She shoved him aside with her foot and opened the door cautiously. The maid stood in the hall, unwinding a cotton scarf from her head.

"Come in. He won't bite." She hooked a restraining finger around Macduff's collar and pulled him aside. It was then that she saw the child. "Hello. Who's this?"

Francis smiled, revealing a row of stumpy, discolored teeth and spongy gums. "This is my boy Michael."

He was a slight child with white thin legs and knobby knees. His leather liederhosen hung loosely on his narrow body, gaping at the legs; fine blond hair fell forward over his round face.

"Say good morning to Mrs. Grant, Michael."

The child peered out from beneath his fringe of blond hair. His eyes were pale gray, the color of the sky after a rain. "Guten morgen." He began to remove his sweater, undoing the buttons with careful fingers.

"In English, Michael."

"Good morning." He spoke slowly, exploding a soft k at the end of his greeting. He gazed at Lanny steadily, intent and dubious, with the watchful air of someone who did not hear well.

Francis took the sweater from him. "For his age, the English is good, no? He learns from the American children where I work also."

"Well, Michael," Lanny said, releasing her hold on the dog and straightening up, "perhaps you can help me with my German."

Macduff barked wildly and hurled his black body against the child's thin legs. Michael knelt swiftly. "Oh, you have a dog. His name is what?"

"Macduff."

"Mick-duff?" He placed his soft accent on the first syllable, turning his gray gaze from the dog to Lanny.

"That's right." She motioned the mother and child into the apartment, unsure of what to do next.

The maid fished an apron from a string bag. "We start with the work now, no?" She glanced quickly from Lanny to the child and lowered her voice. "You do not mind I bring Michael? He has his summer holiday now, and to leave him at home, I must pay someone to watch him. Is much money then."

"No. That's fine." Lanny hesitated. "What will he do all day?"

"Do not worry, Mrs. Grant. He plays with that dog until he dies if I let him. No, I will be-- how do you say it?--business as usually. You will not know he comes."

Lanny showed the maid around the apartment, suggesting tasks. Francis nodded continuously, waving her hands as if to brush aside the instructions. "Yes, yes. Do not worry. I know how to do. Every apartment is alike."

Lanny gathered up the breakfast dishes from the dining table and carried them into the kitchen. Michael sat in the middle of the floor, legs spread, stroking the dog. She glimpsed his underwear through the wide legs of the liederhosen. It was a grimy white, frayed at the edges. She tried to imagine his life, curious about his days spent in the homes of a people who had fought against his country.

"How old are you, Michael?"

He held up his hands, fingers spread.

"Ten?"

He nodded.

"What do you do all day while your mother works? Do you ever get bored?"

"What means it, bored?"

"You know. Not having enough to do."

"Bored?" He rolled the r on the back of his tongue, tasting the new word. "Where my mother works at Captain Kendrick's, I play with two little

girls. You have children, no?"

"No. Not yet."

"I play with Mick-duff. I am not bored."

Lanny wanted to brush back the fine hair that hung over his forehead, to tuck in the shirt blousing at the waist of his liederhosen. "Would you like a glass of milk? And a cinnamon roll?"

"No, thank you." He pronounced it, "Sank you."

Francis appeared suddenly in the doorway.

"Michael, if Mrs. Grant is so nice to ask, you must say yes."

"Yes, sank you." He climbed up and sat on a stool at the counter, his legs dangling.

Lanny set a plate of rolls before him and poured a glass of milk. She could sense the maid watching her from the door. "Can I get anything for you, Francis?"

The woman frowned, as if considering an important question, then smiled widely. "Please, if it is not trouble, I have a cup of coffee." She pulled a crushed package of cigarettes from her apron pocket and held it up. "You do not mind if I smoke?"

"No. Both my husband and I smoke." She set out an ashtray and the maid moved to where her son sat, bending her head over her cupped hands to

light the cigarette. The child watched, owl-like.

"Eat, Michael. Mrs. Grant cannot wait until tomorrow for you to finish."

The child lifted a roll from the platter and held it in his hand, his long fingers circled around it. There was a faint crescent of dirt beneath each nail. Lanny watched him as he ate. Keeping his eyes fastened on the pastry, he swooped his free hand downward to the roll, plucked a wad of soft dough and popped it in his open mouth, swallowing rapidly.

Macduff sniffed the air and put his front paws on the boy's lap. Michael handed him a hunk of the roll, then another. The dog whined for more.

"Michael," Lanny said very gently. "Don't feed the dog. You'll make a beggar out of him."

Startled, the child dropped the remains of the roll on the plate and put his hands in his lap. His veined eyelids fell over his eyes, like a shade unrolled from the top, and he would not look up again.

Francis snuffed out her cigarette and carried her dishes to the sink. "Cigarettes and coffee," she said with a sigh. "Is my life. I could live upon them. But now I am back to work."

When his mother had left the room, Michael sidled up to Lanny. "I am sorry to feed the little dog," he whispered. "I do no more."

"That's okay," Lanny said. "Do you like ice cream? We can have ice cream for lunch."

"Oh, jah." His pale eyes shone. "I like very much."

He began to stroke the dog again, then sighted Macduff's red ball where it had rolled that morning beneath the table. He held it up. "Is okay, I play with the ball?"

Lanny nodded. Michael threw the ball and Macduff retrieved it, growling. The child threw it again, this time harder. It hit the utility cart, rattling the appliances.

Michael laughed. "So many plug-ins you have. So shiny."

The dog wriggled with excitement. He chased the ball joyfully, sliding across the kitchen floor and tumbling over his own feet, then scampered back to Michael. The boy tossed the ball again and again. It banged into the cupboards and rolled under Lanny's feet. The dog and the child were everywhere.

"Michael," called Francis, "do not bother Mrs.

Grant."

"No, that's all right," Lanny called back.

"He's fine."

She caught the ball on a bounce and laid it solidly on the table. "Shall we save the ball for later, Michael?"

His features settled into immobility. "Jah. I do not care."

For the rest of the morning, he sat in the living room staring out the window, his hands in his lap, fingers curled upwards. Lanny tried to write letters at the desk, but was uneasily aware of the child's presence. Several times, she turned to speak to him, but he refused to meet her glance. Finally, she retreated to the kitchen table, where she wrote steadily for the rest of the morning, her pen scratching angrily against the silence.

At lunchtime, Michael came to the table when called, but picked listlessly at his food. When she brought the ice cream, he glanced swiftly up, but turned away again when he saw Lanny watching him.

"Would you like to draw a picture after lunch?" Lanny finally asked. "I have some colored pencils."

Francis smoothed her son's collar. "That will be good. Michael maybe will be an artist, like his father. His teacher tells me he is drawing the best in the class."

"Your husband is an artist?"

Francis laughed. "Oh, Mrs. Grant. I was never married to such a man. He is good-looking, like a picture--but a devil, that one. Some day I tell you about it."

Michael suddenly leaned forward, no longer sullen. "The rich people in the town pay him much money for pictures. He is sending us eighty marks every month."

"Jah, Michael, you know is not so smooth like you say. Every month, Mrs. Grant, I must go to tell him about the money. Not once he remembers."

"My father gives me paints once," Michael said eagerly. "A big box."

Francis poked Lanny on the forearm with her finger. "He gives, Michael loses. He is losing everything." She sighed at Michael, a mother's glance of fond resignation. "You mind, I have a cigarette? Is so warm now." She pinned back a straggling wisp of hair.

Lanny nodded, but sensed a rising awkwardness

at sitting in conversation with the maid, then was ashamed. Francis had had a hard life. "Here, have one of mine."

Francis took it eagerly. "The American kind is the best. During the war I would sometimes die to have a good cigarette." She lit it and inhaled deeply with obvious enjoyment, holding the smoke in her lungs with her eyes closed, then exhaling slowly. "One cigarette, then to work. Everything for you will be shining. You will see."

Lanny looked around. Francis had already polished the floors, and the apartment smelled pleasantly of wax. "Everything shines now."

"Oh, jah. You will see, Francis is a good worker." She leaned back in her chair and shook her head. "My mother would die again to see me now. When I grow up in East Prussia, we have a maid, two maids for the big house. I do not know then what work is."

"You're not from Germany?"

"Never," replied the maid scornfully. "I am only here after the war. The Russians come through my town, take us to the prisons, every woman screaming and crying. I think I go crazy from being so much afraid. But I make a friend, and she is helping me

to escape. I ride on a train to hide, and I get off here. My dress, it is all hanging in pieces and I have no petticoat. The people on the streets, they look at me like this." She widened her eyes and pulled down the corners of her mouth with her fingers.

Michael laughed. "Here, they never have the bombs and cannot know how it is. They think my mother is very funny." He turned to his mother. "Tell about the knife."

Francis rose and ruffled the child's fine hair. "Another time, Michael. Now we have much work."

Lanny stood hastily, anxious to end the conversation. She felt that she had become linked in an unwilling friendship with the maid. "Did you have enough to eat? Can I get you anything else?"

The woman had gathered some dishes from the table; now she put them down again and laced her fingers together at her waist, as if in supplication. "If I am eating another bite, I pop. But you could do Francis a big favor."

"What?"

"Please, could you get for me a carton of the American cigarettes at the PX? Is not so expensive then and the cigarettes are better."

Lanny hesitated. The request was flagrantly

against regulations. "It's against the rules. I could get my husband in a lot of trouble."

"Oh, I am not telling a person. I pay you next week, jah? Is a big favor you do for me."

"Well, all right. Just this one time."

She did not reveal the maid's request to her husband, but purchased the cigarettes the next day and hid the carton in the linen closet behind a stack of towels. She had thought of buying a box of water-colors for the child, but left the PX in such guilty haste that she forgot. Remembering her intent the next day, she planned to return to the PX during the week; then, busy with committee meetings for an officers' party for which she had agreed to do the table decorations, she neglected the errand. Not until the boy and his mother appeared at her door the following Wednesday was she reminded of it.

"Oh, well," she thought. "I can do it another time." But her greeting to them was extra-bright and gay, as if to compensate for her thoughtlessness. "Good morning, Francis. I'm glad to see you again, Michael."

"Mrs. Grant," exclaimed the maid, putting a hand on Lanny's shoulder, "all week Michael was after me. Tell her what you are saying, Michael."

The child ducked his head, then looked up shyly. "I want to know how many days until we see you." He swooped up the dog in his thin arms. "Mick-duff, Mick-duff! Are you missing me?"

The dog wriggled to the floor and began to run through the apartment in wild circles, barking a sharp invitation to play.

Michael chased after him. "Where is the ball, Mick-duff? We play ball." The clamor penetrated the early morning quiet; in the shaft of sunlight streaming through the window, particles of dust jiggled furiously, as if in alarm.

"The little dog makes him happy," Francis laughed; she moved closer to Lanny. "Mrs. Grant, is all right if I have a cup of coffee before I go to work?"

"Certainly." Lanny shoved back a sense of annoyance. "We'll have to hurry, though. I thought you could defrost the refrigerator, and I've put all the food on the table."

"Don't you worry. I have plenty time. I stay until everything is finished." Francis took a cup and saucer from the kitchen, then poured her own coffee from the pot on the stove and perched on the stool. A fresh surge of noise burst from the next

room. Lanny calculated swiftly: thirteen weeks remained until their departure for the States. Michael would come only twelve times after today.

"I want to tell you about Michael," the maid said, speaking softly, out of the child's hearing. "Last Saturday I am thinking we have nothing to eat but bread, but Michael comes with sausage and beer and cake." She patted the counter in three places, as if indicating the items.

"Where did he get it?"

Francis set her coffee down so hard that the cup rattled in its saucer. "He did not steal, if that is what you think."

"Oh, no, that isn't what I meant." Lanny was sincere.

"No. He is saving his money for a long time--a few phennig one week, a few the next--until is twenty marks. Five dollars. He is getting the money by little pieces of work, people give to him because they feel sorry, is like that with a child. He saves for a long time and in five minutes, he is spending half for expensive food. What do you think of it?"

"I think that's wonderful," Lanny replied, guilty at the maid's hardships. "You should have told me last week that--that--" She fumbled for a

tactful phrase.

"Is all right." Francis drained her cup. "I could live on coffee, but Michael must eat." Her glance became eager and intense. "You did remember my cigarettes?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "I put them away. I'll get them before you go. Remind me."

"I wouldn't let you forget. Now I owe you much money." The woman stood. "I must work hard to pay back."

"That's all right."

"Mrs. Grant, you are a good woman." She patted Lanny on the arm. "I would ask you something else, but I am afraid I make you angry."

Lanny was ready this time. "I've used up my cigarette ration for the month. I'm sorry."

Francis laughed. "Oh, no, I am rich with one whole carton. What I like is a jar of the powdered coffee you buy at the commissary." She laughed again at this misunderstanding between friends.

Lanny hesitated. This too was violating regulations, but how could she refuse? She had already broken the rules once. "Well--all right. But I can't do it anymore. We could both get into trouble."

The maid pulled herself up, setting her chin at

a defiant angle. "Is not necessary you do at all. I only ask."

"No, that's all right. Really. I don't mind this one time," Lanny said, exasperated at the pleading note that had crept into her voice. She was irked by a sense of being compromised, joined in a conspiracy with the maid.

"If you are sure is no trouble," Francis said, suddenly humble. There was the sound of running feet and the dog yipped loudly. "Michael, you do not make a mess, no?"

"Oh, no." He ran into the kitchen. "Can Mick-duff go outside?"

Lanny was quick to agree. "But you'll have to take him on the leash. Otherwise he runs away. And hold on very tight. He pulls hard."

"Jah," nodded Francis slyly to Michael, "we know it. American dogs and American children--they all pull hard on the leash, no?"

Lanny did not respond.

With Michael and the dog out of the apartment, the silence was a relief. She read the paper, only dimly aware of the maid's movements in the next room. When she looked up to check the clock, she noticed the dog's ball on the floor at her feet and picked

it up, concealing it in a drawer of the end table next to the couch. She made a note to do that every week before Michael arrived, wryly irritated with herself for the subterfuge. Why couldn't she just tell the child he must not make so much noise?

As if he had materialized out of her thoughts, he was back again with the dog. "Mick-duff barks at the cars," he said. His shirt clung damply to his skin, and the neat little patches behind the worn spots showed through. "He is wanting to fight with the other dogs."

"What about that picture you were going to draw?" She let him sit at her husband's desk and gave him colored pencils and paper. "If you draw a nice picture, I'll hang it on the wall."

The child worked intently for a long while, murmuring to himself in German. He bent low over his work and pressed hard on the pencils. The back of his neck looked vulnerable, the smooth skin covered with short light hairs that grew towards the center where there was a hollow at the base of his skull. When he left that afternoon, he gave her two pictures. One was a crude outline of evergreens and mountains with a small cottage in the distance, the other a delicate sketch of a vase of gladiola

on her table, the petals finely shaded into a life-like glow. She studied the flower drawing at arm's length, surprised at its charm.

"This is good, Michael. Thank you."

"I try to show how nice the flowers smell," he said.

The next week, he brought another picture, a pencil sketch of a large rock. He had drawn a frame around the edges with the blunt side of the lead, creating a wide-grained wood in careful detail. He watched her as she studied it.

"I work for two days to make good," he said.

Unexpectedly touched, Lanny stooped and gave him a hug, a quick squeeze around his thin shoulders. He leaned against her, yielding to the embrace. "I am so glad Wednesday comes again," he said softly. "You like my picture, no?"

"I do. Very much. I really do." She had resolved to remain aloof, but his shy expectancy warmed her. "I looked forward to having you, too. In fact, I thought we might go into town. I have some errands, and maybe we can buy you some watercolors." The invitation slipped out, unplanned.

The child's eyes widened, his mouth rounded. "Oh, sank you. I would love it. Sank you." He

breathed the words on a gasp of pleasure.

Francis smoothed her son's hair. "Jah, Michael, you have a fine time. I tell him, Mrs. Grant, that maybe sometime you take him for a ride in your automobile." The child and mother exchanged a smile that was like a handshake.

He sat in the automobile beside her, his long fingers clutching the dashboard. "I tell when to make the turns, no? I know when to make it."

The tires whirled on the brick cobblestones. As they neared town, the streets became more choked with bicycles and horse-drawn carts. She slowed down.

"Go fast, Mrs. Grant," Michael urged, hanging his head out the window. "Make us hurry."

Lanny smiled and shifted gears, enjoying his pleasure. Small stucco houses lined the streets, their red roofs sloping steeply towards the sidewalks. She swung carefully around a corner and shifted again.

Suddenly the child thrust his upper body through the open window and cried aloud. "Mrs. Grant! Please, stop. Stop, stop!"

She slammed on her brakes, and the car lurched, throwing Michael back against the seat. Lanny jerked

her head up, panicked. "What, Michael? What is it?"

He paid her no attention, but scrambled to his knees and leaned out the window again to his waist, waving his arms in large, frantic arcs. "Franz, Franz. Kommt hier! Franz, kommt hier!"

"What, Michael? Why did we stop?" Cars piled up behind them, honking in impatient, jagged pandemonium.

Michael pulled back into the car and slumped on the seat. "Was my friend. I could not make him hear. I want him to see how I ride in the big automobile."

Furious, Lanny twisted the car into the clotted traffic. "Do you know we could have had an accident? That was a stupid thing to do! Now just sit still in that seat and stay away from the window." Her throat was so tight that she could hardly speak.

In the periphery of her vision, she saw him crouch back against the door, but he made no reply. His silence only increased her anger. She parked the car in quick jerks and slammed the door behind her. The child sat immobile, staring ahead, his face stony.

"Come on. Aren't you coming?"

"No. I wait here."

Her anger collapsed into exasperation. "Come on, Michael. I'm sorry I yelled. Come on now." Still he sat. "We're going to get you some water-colors, remember?"

He unfolded his legs and climbed out, closing the car door with exaggerated care. When she took his hand, he started to cry silently; the tears ran down his cheek and his nose dripped. A stout peasant woman carrying a wicker basket turned to stare at them.

"Come on, Michael. Don't cry. There's nothing to cry about."

He snuffled and licked the tears that had run into the corners of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to yell. But you scared me with your shouting. Come on, now."

He let himself be led into a nearby toy store where she bought him a box of paints and a plump brush. He pretended to ignore the display of toys until Lanny pulled the door open for him to leave. Then he twisted around and looked longingly over his shoulder. "The big bear is soft like a pillow," he said wistfully. She handed him the bag with

the paints and brush, and he clutched it with his thin fingers, holding it tight against his chest.

"Sank you." He tugged on her arm and she turned to him. "You are mad no more?" She shook her head. "I am sorry I make trouble in the car."

She touched his hair, as she had seen his mother do, and started along the sidewalk. As they turned the corner, Michael stumbled against a woman coming the opposite direction, and they stopped. It was Mrs. Pearson.

"Lanny, hello."

"Hello." She was uncomfortably aware of the shabby child beside her.

"Making some last minute purchases before going home?"

"We still have a few weeks."

"Such a warm day to come to town, but I needed some bridge prizes, and the PX didn't have a thing. Who is your little friend?"

Lanny pulled the boy forward. "This is Michael, Francis' little boy."

"Oh." Mrs. Pearson swept a glance over the child. "She told me she had a son, but I had to make it clear that with children of my own, another one was too much. Well, Michael, making a big day

of it with Mrs. Grant?"

The child nodded, his package held against his chest like a shield. Mrs. Pearson pulled Lanny aside, her back to the boy. "How is Francis working out?"

"Pretty well." She envisioned returning to her apartment, to the shining floors, the neatly stacked laundry, the spotless walls. "Very well. It's a relief."

"I told you it was the only sensible thing to do."

When Lanny returned from town with the child, she saw that Francis had managed to repair the splotches on the floor where the dog had wet. "With a little steel hair, a little wax, much polishing," the maid said. "Was not hard. And you are so good to my boy." Before she left that afternoon, she insisted on taking home a basket of mending, promising that Michael would return it later in the week.

On Friday Lanny slept late and was just floating to the surface of consciousness when the doorbell jangled. Pulling her robe on, she stumbled to the door, noting that a heavy rain was streaking the windows.

Michael stood in the hall, his fine straight

hair plastered to his forehead, his shirt soaked.

"Oh," he whispered, contrite, "I wake you."

"That's all right. She motioned that he should come in and close the door. Macduff wriggled against him, yipping.

"My mother finishes the sewing, but the rain makes too wet to bring the basket."

"That's all right."

"My mother works today for Captain Miller, and I must stay inside on a chair. I am--how do you say--bored. Is all right, I play a little with Mick-duff?"

There was mud on his ankle-high shoes. "Take off your shoes if you want to come in."

He stayed the morning. At noon, Francis called. "Is my boy there?"

"He's been here all morning. I thought you knew where he was."

"Does he make trouble? He is crying and crying to see Mick-duff." The maid sighed apologetically. "I hope he is a good boy. But now he must come for lunch."

"I'll send him right away."

The child's downcast face told Lanny that he had hoped for an invitation to lunch. "I come back

later, no?"

"No. I have an appointment on the post at the dispensary. I'll be gone all afternoon."

"Oh, please," he begged, doubtful but eager, "I can come?"

"Michael," she said sharply, "you're not even allowed inside the gate."

He shrugged and left.

His morning visits became more frequent. The American housing units for officers clustered in a three-block area, and as Francis worked mostly in the neighborhood, it was easy for Michael to come skipping over.

"Mick-duff," he would call, scratching on the door, "I come again. You are glad, no?" And the dog would press his nose against the crack at the floor and whine insistently until Lanny opened the door. Two or three times, she tried not answering the bell, but Michael only perched on the top stair and waited.

As if to ensure his welcome, he was carefully obliging, carrying her groceries up the stairs or bringing her small gifts, a bouquet of flowers or a watercolor painting he had done. Nor, after that rainy morning, did he stay very long. But his

presence began to strum on her nerves, and Lanny became sharper in her reprimands when his mother was not there.

"Michael, don't run through the living room."

"Michael, don't throw the ball so hard."

"Michael, don't get fingerprints on the windows."

She lay awake at night trying to think of a tactful way to ask Francis to keep the child away, but could think of nothing. Afraid that the maid might quit if offended, she balanced the irritant of Michael's presence against the weight of the housekeeping chores--the oven, the floors, the laundry, the walls--and remained silent.

Once, Francis herself provided an opening.

"Michael is a bother, no?"

"No," Lanny replied sharply, hoping that her terseness would imply the contrary. She felt helpless and angry--whether with the maid or herself, she hardly knew.

Finally, she began to tie Macduff outside much of the time on a length of clothesline. The dog barked constantly, straining at the rope and tangling it around the tree to which he was tied, but Lanny kept him there. Less than a month of their tour remained.

Michael's visits dwindled; sometimes she saw him during the week in the yard with the dog, but only briefly. He was gone when she returned to the window a second time. On Wednesdays he walked Macduff on a leash or sprawled with him in the grass. With the child out of the way, Francis worked more steadily, with less time out for cigarettes and coffee.

But the maid was not fooled. "The little dog, he makes again wet in the house, no?"

"Oh, no," Lanny replied without thinking. "Not for a long time."

"Then why must he be always outside?" The tone of the question, triumphant and scornful, showed that it was no question at all.

Now, hearing her son's footsteps on the stairs, Francis called out with the exaggerated severity that she had lately assumed, "Michael, do not run in and out so many times! Mrs. Grant is not liking it."

"That's all right," sighed Lanny in what had become a standard reassurance. "What is it, Michael?"

"Oh, Mrs. Grant, you have an old line? I want to skip the rope. Is a little girl on the playground with a line to jump."

Francis tucked in his blouse, maternally possessive. "We stop tomorrow in the stores and I buy you a rope."

"I want to play now with the little girl."

"Just like your father, always with the girls. Go outside." She pushed him through the door and closed it firmly, then returned to the kitchen, rubbing the back of her neck tiredly.

In minutes, Lanny heard the sound of his heavy shoes on the stairs once more and opened the door, hoping to forestall him before he again interrupted the maid at her work. But hardly glancing at Lanny, he pushed past into the apartment, out of breath and gasping as he spoke.

"Oh, Mrs. Grant," he sucked in another breath, "so terrible--you must come--"

Francis hurried to the hall. "What, Michael? Tell me quick."

"Mick-duff--Mick-duff--he runs off."

Lanny stiffened. "How, Michael? He was tied up. I had him tied up."

"I do not know." The child stopped, swallowing air. "I see him running down the street, and I see his line broke loose. Untied."

Lanny was half-way down the stairs. "Where?"

Which way did he go?"

The three of them ran through the blocks of apartment houses, calling the dog's name. The sound arched through the warm air and died.

"He runs so fast, I can not catch him. Like a bird he goes. Like a bird. He just runs like nothing down the street."

It was useless to look further. The dog could be anywhere, and they could not search far, for her husband had taken the car. She notified the German and military police. After three days, she placed an ad in the post bulletin and jumped every time the phone rang. Finally, she put away his feeding pans and canceled her order for the kennel. Macduff would not be going home with them.

At first, Michael continued to drop by to see if the dog had returned. He was disconsolate. "Mick-duff. Little Mick-duff." He smoothed the dog's bed. "Is here your pillow to sleep on. Come home to where you belong."

She knew it was unfair to blame the child, but it eased her to do so: the dog would not have been outside except for Michael. Finally, she risked telling him not to come unless his mother was there. "I'm going to be very busy getting ready to go back

to the States," she said. When he averted his pale eyes and did not respond, the old uneasy sympathy for his impoverished life nudged her again. "Here, take this little box of cookies. I'll see you on Wednesday."

But Francis came alone the next week. Lanny resisted asking about the child, inferring that Michael had repeated their last conversation. When the maid offered no explanation, Lanny supposed she had seen the last of him, for only eight days--one Wednesday--remained until her departure for the States. She thought with relief of her own country, of its careless bustle and familiar ways.

When the doorbell rang on Monday, she was startled to see the child again; gripped by the familiar irritation, she gave him no chance to speak.

"Macduff hasn't come back."

"Jah, I know it. I have for you something to tell."

"What, Michael? What is it? I was just going out."

He paused for a second, his eyes wide and shining, while she waited. "I know where is Mick-duff."

"You know? What do you mean, you know?"

"Yesterday my friend tells me that a lady in the meat shop where his mother goes says that a little dog, very black, comes to her house and stays and stays. So she keeps him until she will read in the Volksplatt that someone is losing a dog. I go to the meat shop--and Mick-duff is waiting."

"Is he all right? Where is he now?"

Michael laughed. "The lady takes me in her car and we come here. She waits in her car with Mick-duff."

Lanny followed the child down the stairs anxiously, afraid to believe him. A green Volkswagen was parked in the lot, and pressing his black nose against the front pane was the missing dog.

He accepted his return nonchalantly, trotting up the stairs with his old swagger, then sniffed about and plopped down on the floor, his head between his paws.

"Mick-duff, Mick-duff," whispered Michael over and over, "you run away and I find you."

Lanny could hardly tell him to leave.

"What do you think, Mrs. Grant, how I find Mick-duff?"

"I think it's wonderful." Overriding her

relief at the dog's return was a sense of being in the child's debt. "I certainly do thank you."

"Jah?" He looked dubious.

"Yes."

"When do you leave?"

"We're flying back on Thursday."

"When do you come to Germany again?"

"Not for a long time."

When he came on Wednesday with his mother, the dog had already been shipped to the processing center in Frankfurt.

Michael put his long thin fingers to his mouth and drew a sharp breath. "He is gone again? Oh, I did not say goodbye."

"No. That's too bad." She spoke flatly, ignoring him. The packers had already arrived, and she was anxious that Francis begin her work, but instead the maid stood talking in German with the men, townspeople employed by the Army, gesturing widely with a cigarette from which she drew an occasional puff.

"What do you think about Michael finding Macduff?" Lanny asked, finally getting the woman's attention.

"Oh, jah. Michael is talking of nothing but

the dog."

"Francis, while the men are working in the bedrooms, could you wash the bathroom windows?"

"Mrs. Grant, everything just get dirty again. I clean everything later. You don't worry. I stay until I am done." She smiled at her child, who followed the men from room to room.

"Goodbye," he said, fondling a book or ashtray. "Goodbye, I never see you again."

It was late in the afternoon when the packers finished. The apartment looked dismal, stripped of her belongings and strewn with excelsior. Lanny had hoped that Francis would finish early. She planned to pay her for the full day and send her off with some extra money, so that she and Michael could have a nice dinner in town. But Francis had wasted the day in conversation with the German movers, and the sweeping and dusting remained.

"Can you come tomorrow morning? We're not checking out until afternoon. The inspectors are coming at one."

"Tomorrow is my day for Mrs. Pearson."

"But I have to meet my husband in an hour. The people that we're staying with tonight are taking us for dinner at the Officer's Club."

"You don't worry. I stay to finish and put the key in the mailbox."

"I tried to tell you all day--well, there's nothing I can do now. I'll pay you extra because it's so late." That was fair. "And you can take that box of food on the kitchen table--there's some mustard and catsup and a little coffee. And some spices."

"Oh, Mrs. Grant," said the maid lightly, "I think we do not need your old food."

Lanny whirled into the bedroom, hot with embarrassment. "If I were as poor as she says she is, I wouldn't be so fussy about taking a little catsup," she sputtered aloud. She dressed hurriedly, without showering, wanting only to be gone from the maid. When she came out, Francis was briskly sweeping excelsior from the couch into a bag that Michael held. Lanny's high heels clicked on the floor, and the maid turned. "I'm leaving now, Francis."

The woman put down her broom and extended her hand. "We hope for you good luck."

"Thank you. The same to you." She wanted to add something friendly, that she had been glad to know them and wished them well, but the words hung

back like shy or stubborn children. "Here, Michael," she said instead, "I have a photograph of Macduff that you can keep." She pulled it from her billfold.

"Sank you." He took it between his thin fingers without examining it, his gray eyes searching her face. "We never see you again, no?"

"No." She felt unaccountably sad. "You be a good boy now. Goodbye, Francis. Goodbye, Michael."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Grant," they chorused. "Auf wiedersehen."

"Thank you, Francis, for all the work you did. And you, Michael, for finding Macduff. I'll put your wages on the table." She tied up her debts to them and stood a moment longer, waiting for them to do the same. But they only nodded in wordless solemnity, their gaze steady.

That was how she remembered them, the maid with excelsior caught in her hair, her arm about the thin shoulders of the child whose long fingers held a creased photograph. The image made her vaguely uneasy, haunting in the manner of a fading dream, and she tried not to think of them at all. She might have succeeded had it not been for the white square envelope.

It slipped from the excelsior while she was

unpacking. Puzzled, she picked it up and examined the round lettering that spelled out "Michael" in the upper left corner and her own name across the center. Curious, and yet with an odd trepidation, Lanny ripped open the flap. The letter was printed in careful lines that slanted upwards. She had an instant's image of the child bent in intense concentration, much the same as he had sat at her desk some months ago, pressing hard upon a blunt pencil. As she read, it seemed that he hovered at her elbow, voicing the words in his soft accent.

"Hello, Mrs. Grant. You are surprised to hear from me I think. I want to say thank you for everything nice--" and there followed a detailed listing of small kindnesses, not only the watercolors and a toy car she had once given him, but such trivial items as a package of peanuts and an ice cream cone.

"Now I tell something what is making me sorry. I am telling not even my mother. When Macduff runs away--" and Lanny was almost startled that the name was not set down as Mick-duff--"the blame is for me. I untie his line to jump with the little girl. I think to bring Macduff in the house, but he runs so fast I am not catching him. I am very sorry to make trouble. I am glad to find poor Macduff again.

So I give you a surprise to buy good meat for the little dog.

"Say to Macduff I miss him much and give to him a hug for me.

Your friend,

Michael."

Enclosed in the envelope was a ten mark note.

MORE HILLS TO CLIMB

From the instant Claudia said she might come to camp with me, I was worried. "Maybe you won't like it," I said.

We were sitting on the curb outside my house, waiting for her mom to pick her up. It was the first warm night of spring, and the air still smelled of thawing snow, moldy and damp.

"Why not?" She screwed up her face as if the sun were in her eyes, even though it was dark. She had straw-colored hair, and in the dim light, her face had that lashless, unfinished look I had noticed before in redheads.

I tried to picture Claudia at camp with Bunny and Gail and me, walking in step down the stony camp paths, arms linked, and singing in harmony as we went. I could hardly wait to see Bunny and Gail again; I could talk to them about things I hid from Claudia--

that my dad cried when he didn't get the promotion at the bank, that my little brother had been picked up for shoplifting, that I let Babby Graham touch me inside my bra once when he came over and no one else was home.

"Listen," I said to Claudia, scruffing at some cinders by the curb, "there's a lot of outdoor stuff at camp, like sleeping out overnight. No electric lights in the cabin. And the johns are way down the hill. You just sit on a board with a hole in it."

"I wasn't expecting a Holiday Inn," she said.
"Don't you want to go?"

What could I say? She had been my best friend since grade school, but just thinking of her at Camp Holiday gave me that rigid feeling I got when I was caught cheating on a spelling test last year. She was as different from Bunny and Gail as milk from 7-Up. If she didn't like them, where would I be?

Claudia didn't make friends easily. She never criticized people out loud, but she had a starchy air of judgment about her, always polite but a little remote, her eyes narrowed, with the fixed look of someone concentrating on a math problem. I suppose we started out friends because our mothers were

friends; we grew up both liking horses and Wuthering Heights and movies with Paul Newman. But for as long as I had known her, I had never seen her cry, and she never told me anything she didn't want repeated.

Whatever she did, she did well, with the casual assurance of someone who succeeds easily. She was very intelligent in a quiet way, able to answer questions at school when called on, but never waving her hand around to prove she had done her homework. She had studied piano for years, and usually took first or second place in the state music contests. I liked to watch her play: she settled herself at the piano with an efficiency that reminded me of my father's secretary at the typewriter, hitching the bench into position and placing her large, knuckly hands on the keyboard as if she were in a hurry. It always surprised me when the melody came out fluid and graceful, with little runs and trills; somehow, I expected marches, not sonatas, from Claudia. Perhaps it was the way she sat, her back so straight, her shoulders squared, her eyes intent on the music where notes clustered thick as flies on a screen door. If she ever struck a wrong note, I was not aware of it.

But I loved those weeks away from her with Bunny and Gail. They scoffed at rules as easily as Claudia followed them. Last summer, when we were only fourteen, they sneaked a canoe out after midnight and paddled to Gull Point and back. Bunny said she had tried pot and Gail knew a girl at school who had had an abortion.

Our days together swung between celebration and mourning. When Gail earned her Loon badge in diving, we were so happy for her that we jumped off the high board with all our clothes on. When Bunny didn't get a lead part in the camp musical, she climbed up in the stable loft and cried for an afternoon, exploding with one swear word after another. To make her feel better, I said she'd have more fun in the chorus without so many lines to memorize, but she knew I didn't mean it and sobbed out another string of words. Later she told me that I shouldn't say what I didn't believe, not even if I was trying to be helpful.

As camp came closer, I prayed that Claudia would change her mind about going, although I was certain that she wouldn't. I had never known her to change her mind about anything. When our cabin assignments came in the mail, there was her name with the rest

of ours.

Camp started on a Sunday, and we had to ride the Greyhound all Saturday night to Brainerd, Minnesota, where the camp van met us. By the time it came, I felt almost sick, my knees stiff, my eyes dry and grainy. The ride jounced and shook us so much that I thought I might throw up. Claudia looked ill too, her head bobbing with every jolt, her face slack like someone asleep. But when we rumbled across the wooden bridge that marked the entrance to camp where the lake narrowed, I forgot about feeling sick, even forgot about Claudia on the seat next to me; I looked hard at everything, the thick stands of pine and birch around the lake, the log dining hall and boat docks, the rocky paths branching off the main road up to the cabins.

Bunny was sitting on the high diving board, swinging her legs. I scrambled off the van and dropped my duffel and tennis racket by the road.

"Hey, Bunny," I yelled, running towards the lake, "get a move on. You've got places to go and people to see."

She whooped and jumped to the dock, meeting me on the beach. We swung each other around, as we always did when we met the first day, and I saw that

she hadn't changed at all. She still wore her dark hair short and curly, cropped over her ears. She was tan already, and her left cheek had the smudge of freckles I remembered.

"God, it's good to see you," she said. "I saved you a bunk."

"Hey, yeah," I said. She saved me a bunk every year. "Where's Gail? Has she come yet?"

"Gail's unpacking. She got here about an hour ago. C'mon, I'll help you carry your stuff. God, are you thin. Don't you eat?"

Claudia was waiting with the luggage, and I tried to see her through Bunny's eyes, as if we had never met. Her hair had matted into ropey tangles, and one side of her collar was twisted inside her shirt. She seemed less guarded than usual, her head to one side, smiling almost shyly, shading her eyes from the sun with one hand. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, looking at me as if for permission, so I introduced her to Bunny.

"I've heard so much about you," Claudia said, "that I feel like I know you already." That was the kind of thing my mother said when she met people, and I was surprised to hear Claudia talking like that.

Bunny grinned. Her two front teeth were shorter than her other top ones, which gave her a lispy, prankish look. "Don't believe everything you hear, Claude."

Claudia hated nicknames, but if she objected to being called "Claude," she didn't show it; her smile widened and she said she had heard only good things. When Bunny smiled back and reached out to help Claudia with her duffel bag, I began to hope that the summer might turn out better than I had expected.

After we unpacked and showed Claudia around, it was already time for vespers. I hadn't been alone yet with Gail and Bunny; I was dying to talk to them in private, and also, I wanted to warn them to go easy with their language around Claudia for a while, but there was no chance. We had to change into Sunday whites and get down to the chapel at the end of the path by the lake.

I had always liked vespers. Everyone looked scrubbed and tan in their white clothes, more gentle and thoughtful than usual. We could see the lake between the trees and the air smelled of pine. The altar was a half log held up by two posts. Across the front of it someone had carved in capital letters, GIVE ME MORE HILLS TO CLIMB, a motto we always joked

about. On nature hikes, after reaching the top of an especially steep place, we'd collapse on the ground, out of breath, and look at each other and say, "Give me more hills to climb."

The benches were half-logs too. Kim, the director, always gave a little talk; a sermonette, she called it. Her sermons were dull, full of quotes such as, "Life is real, life is earnest," or, "This above all, to thine own self be true." When I first came to camp, I liked the rhythm of the words. I'd repeat them to myself, feeling solemn and important. But now when I heard them, it was like listening to the pledge of allegiance; I knew which word was coming next, but there wasn't much meaning to any of them. So I listened to the flies buzz, the late afternoon sun hot on my back, and peeled the birch bark from the benches down to the smooth white wood.

Bunny was sitting between Claudia and me, and I tried to get her opinion of Claudia, raising my eyebrows as if to ask a question. But Bunny didn't seem to know what I meant. She looked down at her hymn book, very solemn and churchy.

"I would be brave, for there is much to dare," she sang, then added in a staccato whisper, "Under the sheets." I pretended I hadn't heard her and

hoped Claudia hadn't either.

When we sang, "I Surrender All," she did it again, so I gave her a poke in the ribs. She turned and frowned, startled and disapproving, as if I were the one acting up. Then she grinned, first at me, then at Claudia. Claudia grinned back. At first, I thought Claudia hadn't caught on and was just smiling to be agreeable, but when we sang "To Thee I come," she gave Bunny a sly look and I knew she understood.

By the end of the first two weeks, I stopped worrying about Claudia. Bunny and Gail liked her; the four of us walked along the paths together just as I had imagined, singing old songs in harmony and keeping step, our legs--tanned but scabby with mosquito bites--striding in unison. We called ourselves "The Quartet."

Claudia had been assigned to the advanced riding class with Bunny. I rode in the intermediate group again, which steamed me a little, for Claudia and I had ridden together at home every Saturday, and I hadn't noticed that she was better.

But I pretended that I didn't mind. Her class met the hour before mine, so if I got to the stables early, I'd sit on the fence and watch. She and Bunny rode as partners during drill, and I had to

admit they were good. Claudia handled her horse with the same deft economy with which she played the piano, her hands so steady that she hardly seemed to be pulling on the reins, her legs nearly motionless below the knees. When the commands came, she sent Bunny one of her narrow looks and they rode towards each other with perfect timing, meeting in the center of the ring and turning at exactly the same instant, one a mirror of the other.

"You two are terrific," I told them one day. "The best in the class. You'll win all the blue ribbons for drill this year."

"C'mon," Bunny said. "Don't give me that shit."

I glanced at Claudia. Whenever anyone back home used a four-letter word around her, she wrinkled her nose and frowned a little, like a person about to swallow a spoonful of medicine.

"We're going to try," she said, not frowning at all. I recognized her expression--the triumphant look of earned recognition I had seen when she took her bow at piano recitals.

Claudia was doing well in sailing, too. When she came to Holiday, she didn't know a mast from a rudder, but by the middle of July, she had won three racing trophies. Most of the time she sailed with Bunny,

one of the best sailors in camp. I went along a few times, but I had tried sailing before and didn't like it. Everything about it made me uneasy--the keeling of the boat as it came about, its sails nearly parallel to the water; the slippery decks wet with spray; the sudden lull when the breeze died and the sails flapped loosely in the wind, bulky and perverse.

Usually I spent my afternoons canoeing; it was peaceful out on the lake, where the only sound was the gurgle of the paddle cutting the water, gliding the canoe forward with each stroke. Bunny and Gail and I had often canoed together, changing places every half hour. I loved my turn in the middle with nothing to do but lie quietly, my head on the back thwart, my arms over the side, trailing my fingers in the water while the canoe rocked gently. But now it was just Gail and I out there, and we paddled steadily without talking much.

Even when they weren't sailing, Claudia and Bunny were off together, disappearing at odd times.

"Where'd Claudia go?" I'd ask Gail, as casually as if I'd been asking the time. "Where's Bunny?" But she would only shrug, busy with her own concerns and indifferent to mine. I began to suspect that

they were deliberately hiding from us, perhaps to talk about me; certainly they talked about me part of the time, for Claudia seemed familiar with incidents from previous summers that only Bunny could have revealed. I would watch for them along the shore or listen for their voices as we passed the lodge, hoping to surprise them in a private moment and expose their treachery.

One afternoon it rained steadily for hours, and I wandered about camp alone searching for them, sad and angry, checking the craft house and the stables, finally returning to the cabin where I lay on my bed trying to read, looking up whenever footsteps scuffed on the rocky path. The awnings were down to keep the rain out, and the cabin was half-dark, the color of early winter mornings. When they returned, shortly before dinner, I pretended to be asleep, hoping to eavesdrop.

But they clumped about on the wooden floor without saying much, as if they knew I was listening.

Feigning drowsiness, I sat up slowly and stretched. "What time is it?" I asked, yawning.

"About five."

"Five! Almost dinner time?"

"Yes."

"Where have you been all afternoon?"

They traded a glance. "Just goofing around."

"In the rain?"

Claudia looked at me and frowned, her eyes the color of dried mud. "Why? What's the big deal?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering," I said mildly, afraid of starting an argument.

"We're doing an act for the talent show," Bunny finally said after a long silence. "If you have to know. We've been rehearsing almost every day. But it's a surprise. Kim got us a ride to town this afternoon to buy straw hats."

I promised not to tell and said I knew they'd be terrific, but I remembered how at the beginning of the summer, we had been the Quartet.

After the talent show, everyone began calling them Bunny and Claude in the same way they'd say "cup and saucer."

"Where are Bunny and Claude?"

"Ask Bunny and Claude if they want to go."

"Save these seats for Bunny and Claude."

There was a tightness in my chest now that never eased up. I tried to talk to Gail about it.

"Bunny's changed, don't you think?"

"How so?"

"She's no fun anymore."

"How so?"

"She's just different. Don't you notice?"

Since she hadn't, there wasn't much else I could say. But I'd lie awake at night on my cot feeling the tightness and listen to the water lap against the shore and hear the counselors coming back from the lodge, their steps crunching on the gravel. I thought about home a lot, the way the screen door off the kitchen slammed and how our dog pushed his nose into my lap during dinner. I wished camp were over.

One night while I was lying there, Bunny heaved herself up in bed and slammed her pillow down on the foot of her bed. "Shit," she said loudly, even though we usually whispered after Taps.

"What's wrong?" Gail asked sleepily in a blurred voice.

"I'm bored out of my skull. Let's do something exciting."

Our counselor had left for her day off and wouldn't be back until after midnight. I rolled over so I could see Bunny's face. "What do you want to do?"

"Anything," she whispered fiercely and flung her pillow against the floor. "Any ideas? What do

you say, Claude?"

"Go to sleep," Claudia answered. "I'm tired."

"You want to go down to the stables?" I offered. We had crept down there once at night and sat astride the horses bareback, laughing at how they ignored us.

"To do what?"

"I don't know. Climb up in the loft or something."

"I said, something exciting. Like hitching a ride to town."

Claudia's bedsprings creaked and she propped herself up on one elbow. "Now?"

"Yeah. Now. Why not?"

Claudia flopped back down. "That's stupid. Do you want to get raped?"

Bunny snorted, and the sound went uh-uh in a ragged breath from the back of her throat. "By who? All the men around here are busy fishing."

"Count me out," Claudia murmured. That's what I had said last year when Gail and Bunny paddled to Gull Point but now I sat up and pushed back my covers.

"Shall we sneak out a canoe?" I asked, wary at the prospect, but caught by the image of Bunny and me on the lake by ourselves, talking privately in

the old way.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care. Just around on the lake."

"Listen," Bunny said, jumping a little on her bed in excitement, "I've got a terrific idea. Let's paddle over to the Mallard Bay Tavern and get some beer. We could be back in two hours."

"You could be in jail in two hours," Claudia said.

"No one would sell us any beer," I said. "We're under age."

Bunny scrambled out of her bed and sat on the edge of my cot. "Bullshit. We can pass for eighteen easy. I mean, it's not like with a guy who hasn't got any whiskers yet. My boobs aren't going to be any bigger in three years. C'mon. The lake is really calm."

"What if we get caught?" I said. "It takes a long time to get to Mallard Bay. Almost an hour."

"Hey, I've got a better idea," Bunny whispered, intense and determined. "We can sail over. We'll be there and back in no time."

At the thought of scrambling about on a sailboat in the dark, my throat tightened and I felt sick at my stomach. "There's no wind," I said and swallowed

hard against panic. "You said so yourself. You said the lake was calm." We could see the lake from our cabin, its surface smooth and depthless, like fresh paint.

"There's always a little wind on this lake. We could make it."

"No. Not in a sailboat."

"Will you go in a canoe?"

I hadn't intended to go to Mallard Bay at all; I hesitated, aware that the other girls sat motionless, watching us.

"Yes or no?" Bunny hissed in that fierce whisper.

I nodded my head wordlessly, aghast at what I was about to do.

We dressed in the noiseless vacuum of a dream. Bunny slipped out the door and jumped to the path, a rock skittering beneath her feet.

I froze, peering at Gail in the darkness.

"Are you sure you don't want to go?"

She punched her pillow with one hand and lay back down, warm and safe beneath her blankets. "No." Then she raised her head again. "Listen, if it starts to get late, turn around. Forget the tavern."

"I will," I whispered, a little relieved to remember that Bunny couldn't go anywhere without me.

After we had paddled out a little way, maybe I could talk her into coming back.

I could barely see Bunny between the trees on the path. Her shirt flashed grey-white in the moonlight for an instant, then melted into shadow. From the lake, the loons screamed their wild calls.

We lifted the canoe into the water without talking. Across the bay, the tavern light winked in the darkness, a million miles away. I wondered what my folks would say if they knew what I was doing now.

We paddled out from shore a few strokes, Bunny in the stern, me in the bow. I hadn't worn a jacket, and the air off the lake was damp and cold on my arms. An unseen fish or loon nearby broke the water with a quick splash. I rested my paddle across the gunwales and strained into the dark, my eyes scanning the far shore where the tree line bunched dimly against the sky.

"C'mon," Bunny said. "Stroke."

We went further. Bunny ruddered her paddle, and the canoe swung to the right, towards the center of the lake. The water rippled from beneath the bow, rocking the light mirrored in its surface. I glanced back over my shoulder at Bunny. She was

bending forward as she paddled, veiled in shadow. Behind her, the shore of the camp had disappeared. I wondered if Claudia was still awake.

"Keep stroking," Bunny said, her voice rough and insistent. "Every time you stop, it throws us off course."

"I can't see the shore any more," I whispered as my paddle sliced the water again. "How will we find our way back to camp?"

"Don't worry. God, you look worried all the time anymore."

I stopped paddling and twisted around to stare at her. What did she mean? Had she told Claudia that I looked worried all the time? Her face looked strangely distorted in the moonlight, elongated and hollow-cheeked. "I do not." A motor boat with a sweeping light roared in the distance, its wake sloshing against our canoe. "But I don't like it out here at night."

"Do you want to go back?" It was less a question than a taunt. "If you do, just say so."

"All right, I do." I dipped my paddle into the water at a right angle to the bow and pulled it sharply towards me, turning us back towards shore.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Going back."

"Like hell," she snapped, backpaddling to steer us out towards Mallard Bay again. We circled around once like that, working against each other, and then she started to paddle forward. "Okay, you want to go back, we'll go back. Tuck you safe and sound in bed."

It had been all right for Claudia to stay in bed, I thought. I searched the darkness for a sign of camp, unable to tell which direction we were headed.

"Paddle," Bunny said. "You want to go back? Then paddle."

"You don't have to get mad."

"I'm not mad." The tone of her answer implied that if she wasn't mad, she was not very happy either.

We stroked in unison for a few minutes while I choked back everything I had wanted to say about Claudia and the Quartet. Then suddenly the life-guard tower at the end of the swimming dock loomed ahead, skeletal and fantastic in the dim light. Through the trees a square of light from the window of the counselors' lodge glowed steadily. My arms ached, although we couldn't have gone far.

"Keep to the shore," Bunny whispered. "You wait

here under these trees, and I'll wade in to make sure the coast is clear."

The canoe bobbed crazily as she climbed out, and I clung to the overhanging brush, terrified of drifting out again. The window light went dark, and the blurred shape of the dock seemed to float into the distance. Bunny was taking a long time. I listened intently for her footsteps or for a whispered signal, my gaze fastened to the spot where she had faded from sight. But there was only the faint slap of the waves against the shore and the occasional insane scream of a solitary loon.

Surely she would not have gone back to the cabin without me. I huddled in the canoe, weighing one uncertainty against another. Perhaps she had been caught wading in from the lake and had kept my presence out on the water a secret, trusting me to bring the canoe in later, at a safer moment. How long should I wait? What if she had stumbled in the water and lay at this very instant unconscious in the lake? I remained motionless for another eternity, then rolled my jeans to the knees and climbed out.

The water was deeper than I expected, almost to my waist. I walked backwards, pulling the canoe with both hands, the water sucking at my tennis shoes

with each step. It seemed that I was making no progress; then I waded into water only ankle-deep and pulled the canoe ashore broadside, scraping the bottom on the sand.

A light swung through the trees a few yards away and emerged into the clearing of the beach.

"Who's there?"

I recognized Kim's voice and stood paralyzed, still bent over the canoe, my fingers locked around the gunwale.

"Who is it?" she repeated, coming nearer, the beam of her light arcing across my face.

"It's me."

"Why aren't you in your cabin? What are you doing?"

"Shoring the canoe," I said, trying to sound reasonable, but starting to shake; my jeans and shoes were soaked.

She gave the canoe a vicious pull and dragged it another foot on to the sand. "Where have you been? Were you out on the lake?"

"Just a little ways," I answered, again calmly and logically.

"Just a little ways!" She shook my shoulder hard with one hand and let out a thin wail which

dipped and climbed crazily along a scale of anger. Across the lake came the answering cry of a loon, and I was afraid that I might laugh, despite my fear. Then she shook me again. "My God, out on the lake in the dark? Get up to your cabin. I'll talk to you in the morning. Get going."

I have to find Bunny first," I whispered. "I don't know where she is."

"Bunny?"

"She waded in first. When we came back. I think she's still in the lake."

"Oh, my God!" She beamed her light towards the water and stumbled towards the lake. "We'll have to call the patrol." She began to breathe in huge, sobbing gasps that frightened me more than my getting caught. "Bunny!" she cried. "Bunny, can you hear me? Where are you?"

"Here," came Bunny's voice from behind us. "Don't call the patrol." I swiveled around, muddled and confused, unable to reconcile the location of the sound with my notion of Bunny in the water.

Kim swept her light from the shore to the trees. The beam moved eerily across a leafy tangle of brush, and Bunny came slowly forward into its path, her wet jeans plastered to her body, her hair laced with twigs.

"For God's sake," Kim breathed, "where have you been?"

"By the path over there," Bunny answered with the same reasonable calm I had used. "Waiting by the path."

"By the path?" Kim cried. "Don't lie to me!" She exploded the last word with such emphasis that she might have been saying that it was all right to lie to anyone else. "You were out on the lake, and I know you were out on the lake."

"That was earlier," Bunny said, as if correcting an understandable error. "Just now I was waiting by the path."

Kim was holding the lantern tightly against her stomach with both hands, and it was hard to see her expression, for her jaw blocked the light from below, but the skin on her chin was tightly waffled, as if she had set her lips in a hard line. "Get up to my cabin," she said grimly. "Right now." She strode ahead of us without looking back, and we followed.

"What happened to you?" I whispered to Bunny. "I waited and waited." My heart was pounding so hard that my ears buzzed.

"There were counselors sitting on the dock," she hissed. "You fink! I told you to wait."

"But I did."

"No talking," Kim shot back over her shoulder. We climbed the hill, following behind her; my shoes squished with each step. What would she do? I imagined being sent home on the spot, imagined packing my trunk in the dark under Claudia's covert but watchful gaze. My mother would cry when she met me at the bus depot.

Kim's cabin sat on a ridge overlooking the camp. By the time we climbed the hill, I was breathing hard. She motioned us inside and we stood by the door, blinking in the sudden bright light. On the opposite wall was a picture of Kim as a young girl, sitting on a rock and smiling.

"Let's have it," said Kim. She stood so close to us that I could see the pores of her skin.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing," Bunny said, meeker than I had ever seen her. "Nothing."

"We went out for a little while in a canoe," I offered. "Then we came back."

Kim's glance slid from Bunny to me, her blue eyes unwavering. "Why? Why did you take the canoe out at this hour?"

"I don't know," we said together in unexpected

unison and looked at each other.

Kim stared at us for what seemed a very long time. I wanted to look away, but couldn't. When she finally spoke, her words spurted relentlessly. She said that we were immature and foolish and capricious, that we had put ourselves in jeopardy for no good reason and could have drowned whether we realized it or not, that we were alive this minute only by a fortuitous combination of God's grace and sheer luck, luck not only for us but for the camp where there had never been an accident in the twenty-some years she had owned it because her password was responsibility, which was a two-way street, meaning that the camp had a responsibility to us but we had a responsibility to the camp as well, to say nothing of responsibility to ourselves, and if she had any sense, she would send us home tomorrow, but she knew we were capable of better judgment than we had exhibited tonight and so she was going to let us finish out the summer although whether we would be permitted to return next year was another matter too complicated for serious consideration at the moment and we would talk about this further tomorrow because the tongue has no eraser and right now she was afraid of saying something she might regret so we should go back to our

cabin and she hoped she could trust us to get there without indulging in any more crazy schemes.

We nodded soberly without looking at each other. She opened the door and handed Bunny her lantern and added that she wanted it back before breakfast.

We started down the path, not talking, aware that she was watching us from her doorway; the lantern swung back and forth as we scrambled over the rocks. When we reached the bottom of the hill, I started to cry noiselessly, the tears coming so fast that the light from the lantern bled into spears.

"What's going to happen?" I whimpered, trying to keep my voice steady but needing desperately to talk. "What do you think?"

"Shut up," Bunny hissed, trudging ahead and spitting the words over her shoulder. "You should have thought of that sooner."

I reached out to stop her; my fingers grabbed the wet edge of her shirttail. "Thought of what?"

She whirled around and pushed me stiffly with her fingertips, as if she didn't really want to touch me. "We could have been at Mallard Bay right now if you hadn't been such a chickenshit. We only got caught because you had to come back. You had to come back."

"But--"

"Why didn't you wait on the lake like I said? God, what kind of an asshole are you?"

I opened my mouth to explain, but nothing came out. I had stopped crying, and my skin felt tight where the tears had dried.

Bunny jerked the lantern from one hand to the other and pulled her shirt loose of my fingers, her eyes raking my face. "Why did you nark on me? No one had to know about me."

"Listen, I didn't know what happened to you. I waited as long as I could. A long time."

"Sure you did. At least two minutes."

"I don't know why you're mad at me," I said, choking because I was crying again, crying not just for what was happening now but for all the summers I had spent at camp and for the Quartet and for the way Bunny had swung me around on the beach a thousand years ago. "Just tell me. Why are you mad at me? Why are you mad at me when Claudia didn't even come at all?"

Bunny's mouth went limp and she screwed up her face, uncomprehending; in the dark, she had that lashless, unfinished look I had noticed before in redheads.

"Claudia? What do you mean, Claudia? What has she got to do with it?"

I turned away and started up the hill to the cabin without answering, because I didn't know.

RESORT

There was the tap of rain dripping on the roof, so relentless that it ceased to register any sound at all, but rather like a lurking apprehension, throbbed drearily against the surface of awareness. Paula pulled the covers around her neck and curled into a tense knot of warmth.

"Herb?" she whispered.

Her husband stirred in the other twin bed.

"Ummmm?"

"It's so cold." She waited. "Try to light the heater again."

The night's hush intensified his answering silence.

"Please, Herb. We'll all have pneumonia by the time we go home."

Herb sat up in bed, rubbing his chin with the heel of his palm. "I could call the main desk and

have them send up a boy to see about it."

"It's cabin ten," she prodded, but he only dropped his hand to his lap and sat motionless. She could see his profile outlined against the window, the shadows touching it with a sudden strangeness.

In the next room, the child whimpered in her sleep.

"Herb?"

"I'll tell them about it first thing in the morning."

Paula drew a breath against unbidden tears.

"I can't go to sleep, it's so cold."

"Okay."

She waited again. "Okay, what?"

"Just okay."

Another pause, and now her impulse to cry had sharpened to irritation. "For ninety-four-fifty a day, we could freeze at home."

"It's an oven in Chicago. You couldn't freeze there for any money."

She forced a little laugh. "I bet there's plenty of heat in the main lodge."

"Okay, honey. So the lodge was filled. What do you want me to do? Build an addition?"

"Herb."

He swung his legs onto the floor and padded across the room. "I think I saw an extra blanket on the closet shelf." He spoke heavily, patiently.

She clenched her eyes shut against a lump of frustration. The extra blanket descended upon her with a rush of cold air that smelled faintly of moth balls.

"Okay now?" Herb asked.

The tears surged back, escaping and rolling down her cheeks. "At least next time we'll know to make our reservation at the beginning of the season," she breathed and stuck her head under the covers.

Because it was different if you had a room at the lodge.

"We have a lovely view overlooking the lake," you could say. "Of course, it costs a little extra, but the view is worth it."

Even the others who were assigned to the cabins-- they had a way of talking about it so that you knew. "Not that we mind it for a change, but honestly..."

She sniffed once, audibly, but Herb had collapsed beneath his covers, an impassive mound. In the distance, thunder rumbled faintly, inexorable and surly.

Paula woke to a grey half-light and propped herself up stiffly on one elbow, pushing back her hair. She could see Herb's pajamas flung over a chair in the corner and Carla's hairbrush on the vanity. The cabin was perfectly still.

"Herb?" she called, and then louder, "Carla?" There was no answer. They had gone to breakfast without her.

She swung her feet over the side of the bed. The bare floor was icy. She thrust her feet into her slippers and shuffled to the window. Rain streaked against the glass, and the trees fringing the lakeshore bent and waved in the wind.

I was going to get a tan. I was going to come back with a real good tan.

A fresh gust of wind dashed more rain against the pane.

"Damn it," she cried aloud, kicking a slipper across the room. "Darn it to hell and damn it."

Wagon wheel chandeliers hung from brass chains in the lodge lobby; their electric candles cast a determined light. The desk clerk gave her a professional smile as she entered.

"We're having a little rain today," he said.

Paula removed her dripping scarf and crossed the lobby without replying. The dining room was nearly filled. Chattering voices rose and fell against the clatter of silverware. She did not see Herb or Carla.

"Good morning," said the hostess, suddenly appearing at her elbow. "Table for one?" Paula turned. The girl was young, dark-haired, and slender. Her eyes were shadowed with green mascara.

Paula slipped off her raincoat. "No," she said. "I think my husband's here already with my daughter." She moved past the hostess and scanned the dining room, squinting to bring the room into focus. Angrily, she fumbled in her handbag for her glasses.

The hostess stepped deftly in front of her. "Is that them at the table in the corner?"

The glasses settled on Paula's nose, their frames cold. "Yes." Herb was bending across the table, feeding Carla a strip of bacon. The child was wearing her new shorts and blouse; her long, fair hair was springy from the dampness. "Yes, it is."

The hostess moved forward with Paula in tow, carrying menus and a smile across the room, and stopped in front of Carla's chair. "Eat all your

breakfast?" she inquired brightly.

"Drinked my juice and ate the rest," returned the child promptly, chin tucked demurely down.

"Good girl," smiled the hostess, undismayed. "Then here's your mother," as if Paula were a reward.

Paula circled the table and slid into an empty chair. "Could I have a menu, please?"

The girl gave her a menu, glanced brightly at Herb, smiled once more, and moved away.

"Well," said Herb, "have a good rest?"

Paula studied the menu with pretended absorption, resisting the temptation to look up when others passed their table. "I think I'll just have coffee and a roll."

Herb signaled the waitress and gave the order, then placed an awkward hand on Paula's shoulder.

"I like that outfit. I really do."

"It's from last summer."

"So? I liked it last summer too."

Carla poked a stubby finger into her oatmeal and stirred vigorously. "Daddy and me surprised you, didn't we? We was all dressed by ourselves. Daddy did my hair ribbon." She shook her hair with her free hand. "See?"

"Umm. Don't play with your food." Paula turned

back to the window. There were whitecaps on the lake, as though a frenzied hand had wielded a giant egg-beater throughout the night.

Herb nudged her shoulder. "Pretty fancy joint, huh? Look at the lady over there. She's got on more fur than the three bears."

"I know the three bears," Carla piped. "The mama bear, the papa bear, and the baby bear."

From directly behind her chair, Paula heard the quick tinkle of laughter, high and sharp.

"And are you Goldilocks?" a woman's voice chirped. "Dave, look at that darling child."

Paula smiled on cue, readying words of introduction, but the woman had not moved into her line of vision, and she resisted the impulse to twist around.

"Not Goldilocks," Carla giggled, pleased. "Guess some more."

"What do I get if I guess? Can I have one of those pretty curls?"

"They's my curls."

The woman edged slightly to Paula's left.

"Couldn't I have just one? I don't have any."

Paula looked up. The woman's gold hair was cropped short and fell in wisps over her forehead.

"You can have them all," she said. "They're a

nuisance to comb every day."

The woman continued to smile in a friendly manner, but there was an imperceptible shift in attitude. "I never had to worry. Mine all have hair like straw."

The waitress returned with coffee and rolls. Paula ignored her. "I think we sat across from your bingo table last night. We're Mr. and Mrs. Bromson."

"Yes, of course. Well, we'll probably see you in the lobby later on." She nodded briefly and turned back to the dining hall.

"Maybe you could have just one," Carla called after her, but the woman was gone, red plaid slacks scissoring across the room.

"Honestly, Herb. You could have said hello."

"Why? She wasn't asking for one of my curls, which is a good thing." He rubbed his bald spot good-naturedly.

Paula sighed and turned away from him, while the periphery of her consciousness noted and weighed and measured each bite that the child consumed. "Finish your oatmeal, Carla. Two more bites like a good girl."

The dining room began to empty. People flowed past, chattering softly.

"...told them that either we change rooms or..."

"...shame about the weather being so..."

She realized Herb was speaking to her.

"What?"

"I said, do you want to take a ride into town? I spotted a couple of souvenir shops on the way in. We could go have a look-see."

Her mind hovered between strategies. "There's a get-acquainted coffee at ten-thirty."

Herb sighed. "So?"

She scanned the dining room. The remaining guests had knotted into tight little groups, nodding and gesturing among themselves. The shore of the lake was visible through the window behind Herb. Waves slapped the sand; as each one broke, the beige sand darkened to brown, as if stained by the angry billows.

"All right," she retreated. "Let's go into town. If you think the weather isn't too bad."

"Carla, your mother's afraid we'll melt in the rain." Herb smiled as he spoke, but Paula felt suddenly betrayed and alone.

There was an unexpected hand on her shoulder, and she started.

"You can't tell," a man's voice said behind her.

"It might happen." The voice was resonant and suave, at ease with intruding upon the conversation.

Paula slipped her glasses off and dangled them by a bow.

"In fact, there was one summer when we lost a whole crowd. Just melted away in a heavy downpour." The man moved around to the other side of the table and smiled at Paula.

"Sure," said Herb uneasily.

"I don't think your husband believes me," said the man; he leaned forward, both fists on the table. He was nice-looking in an unobtrusive way. His tanned face was creased by deep lines around his eyes and mouth, his chin protruded stubbornly, rather like the toe of an old boot, and he clenched a pipe between his teeth as he spoke. He winked at Paula and then turned to the child.

"What about you, little one? Do you believe me?"

"No," dimpled Carla, without any notion of what he was talking about. "Guess how old I am."

"Sixteen," said the man, sliding into the empty chair.

"Three," cried the child triumphantly. "Pretty soon four." She held up four fingers. "I'm going

to nursery school when we get back."

"No!" The man made a face of incredulity.

"Then do you know what I'd say? I'd say you had better make the most of your vacation." He winked again at Paula, and the wink united them in an undefined conspiracy.

"The rain," Paula offered, gesturing vaguely toward the windows. "We thought we'd drive into town this morning. Herb wanted to poke around in the souvenir shops."

"On behalf of the management, let me apologize for this rotten weather." He shifted his pipe from one hand to the other and held it lightly by the bowl. "But just between you and me, you don't really want one of those ashtrays from the land of ten thousand lakes, do you?" He studied her with mock seriousness. "No. You couldn't."

Herb pushed his chair back from the table. "We just thought we'd look around a little." He laughed, and the laugh was an apology. "Since swimming is out."

The man half-rose from his seat, acknowledging Herb's presence. "Balin's the name. Billy Balin."

Herb extended his hand. "Herb Bromson."

"Oh," cried Paula. "I know who you are." Her

voice sounded high and thin to her own ears, but the others' silence forced her on. "You're the dancing teacher. Aren't you? I mean, we watched you on the dance floor last night."

Watched, yes, and envied, as the man had led first one woman and then another through intricate turns and whirls. The crowd had cleared until he had the floor to himself, just he and the sleek, fashionable women he had chosen. When the dancing was over, Billy Balin had produced a gilded cup, and the onlookers had clapped as he indicated his various partners. When the applause rose to a rhythmic crescendo, he laughingly placed the trophy in the hands of the winner.

"Voted best dancer of the evening! Let's have a cheer for the little lady of the tango!"

The woman had held her prize above her head, clasping both hands like a fighter in the ring, and Paula could see the laughter straining against the low, beaded bodice of her dress--insouciant, rippling, unembarrassed laughter. She had known a girl in high school with such a laugh, a girl named Laramie, who had been elected May Queen and class secretary and year book editor all in the same year. Paula had watched that girl daily from a table in the school

cafeteria, imitating in private the tilt of that head, the tune of that laugh, as if to seize by force of will the blessing that others such as Laramie lightly claimed by quirk of circumstance or accident of birth--the elusive miracle of not having always to try and try. Now, remembering last night, remembering the applause and the woman's laughing assent to it, she chafed once more at the implacable separation of the suave, the knowing, the partners of the Billy Balins, from those who must sit forever at a small table, while the child and husband whined, "Let's go. Let's go. It's getting late."

Billy Balin jabbed the stem of his pipe in her direction. "You guessed it. That was me on the dance floor, all right. I'm sorry I didn't see you--or I would have stolen at least one dance."

He flattered gracefully, and Paula gave a little depreciatory laugh. "Oh, I couldn't. I mean, I don't know any of those steps. Or anything."

"I take dancing lessons," Carla offered. "I was a duck in the recital."

Billy Balin leaned forward. "You were! Well, what do you know about that? And Mommy doesn't dance. We'll have to fix that, won't we, little lady?"

"Yes," answered the child solemnly. "We'll have to fix that."

"There you are, Mrs. Bromson. The little lady says you should have a dancing lesson." He straightened in his chair as though it were settled. "What about--," glancing at his watch, "what about meeting me in the studio in twenty minutes?"

"No, really. We were going into town."

"That souvenir kick is for the tourists. Come on. I'll show you some of the new steps."

Paula shook her head. "No, really. I couldn't."

"Well, then, I'll show you the old steps. They're coming back." He turned to Herb. "That's right. People are dancing all the oldies again. The fox trot, the swing. You name it, they're doing it."

"No, really. I don't think so," said Paula.

It was as though she hadn't spoken. "How do you vote, Mr. Bromson? Shall we turn your wife into a dancer or no?"

"Sure," Herb answered, bewildered. "Whatever she wants to do."

"Me too," put in Carla. "I want to too."

"You want, you want." Herb rose and patted

Carla on the back. "Let Mommy have her dancing lesson and we'll go play ping-pong. We'll see you later, honey."

Carla jumped to her feet. "What's ping-pong, Daddy? What's ping-pong?" She scurried after her father into the lobby.

"You didn't," groaned Billy Balin. "You didn't wear your tennis shoes."

Paula closed the studio door behind her, glancing sheepishly down at her feet. "Our cabin's way up on the hill," she fumbled. "I didn't think to change." Which was a lie. Her first impulse had been to dash back to the cabin, rain or no, and rip off the slacks and old blouse. But it would have been too obvious that in the short span of twenty minutes, she had dressed up for the dancing teacher. So she had waited out the time in the lobby, milling aimlessly among the other guests and resisting the temptation to join Herb and Carla in the game room.

"Well," conceded Billy Balin, "you would have gotten soaked. Those cabins are in the next county."

"Oh," shrugged Paula, "we don't mind it for a change, but honestly..."

He glanced at her and smiled. "Some people

prefer the cabins. They're more private."

It occurred to Paula that Billy Balin was possibly unconcerned with the social hierarchy here. A customer, after all, was a customer, and what would he know about it anyway? She felt oddly irritated with herself for wanting to impress him.

"Well, take them off."

"My shoes?"

"That's what I had in mind." He flashed a smile back over his shoulder, and she flushed at the implication. She leaned over to untie the laces, aware that he had moved closer.

"The rubber soles stick to the floor," he said.

"I didn't think about that." She sat down on a piano bench and pulled her stockinged feet back out of view, then reached out with one foot and swept the shoes back under the bench. There was a knot in each shoe where the laces had broken.

"Now then." Billy Balin turned to her and rested a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Shall we start with a little swing music? It's getting popular again. The fifties craze and all. Okay?" He bent so that their faces were on a level.

"Okay."

"I'll show you the basic step and you can learn

the variations tomorrow."

"No, really. I mean, I don't know about tomorrow."

He pulled her to her feet. "No pressure intended." Again, the wink. "Now, then, I want you to listen to the music and try to get the beat of it."

The melody was an old one. She remembered the words.

"Picture me upon your knee..."

Billy Balin began to move in time to the music, his feet shifting effortlessly. She concentrated, absorbing the movements. One, two, three, one, two, three, step, step. Her glasses slid down her nose, released by the damp perspiration.

I will not push them up, step, step...

"Think you have it? Now stand facing me. As soon as you get the hang of this step, that's it. Everything else is just a variation."

The song spun against his voice, its words suddenly meaningless.

"Just tea for two, and two for tea..."

...step back, step together, step, step...

She kept her head down, watching her feet as they shadowed his, always a fraction of a beat behind.

"Re-lax, re-lax," said Billy Balin, pounding out the syllables in rhythm. "That's it, just let your feet do the work and re-lax."

He circled her waist with a firm arm, and took her hand. She could feel his wrist against her back, the skin warm through her blouse.

"You're doing fine," he said softly.

Say something, say something, one, two, three,
one, two, three...

"You're a very good dancer," she said.

"That's my job."

"No, really. You're very good."

There was a click as the record ended. He released her hand and smiled down at her. "What do you think?"

"About what?"

"Your progress."

"What do you think?"

"I think you're doing fine."

She wanted to say, "I had a good partner," but instead stood mutely before him, conscious of her arms hanging at her sides.

"What's your first name?"

"Paula."

"Can I call you Paula?"

His voice was soft, almost tender, and she shrugged a little, meaning "yes," absurdly flattered. There was a silence while he continued to smile at her, his brown eyes meeting hers steadily.

"I wonder how Carla's doing with ping-pong," she said finally, glancing towards the door as if the game room were visible from where she stood.

"The real question is, how is Mr. Bromson doing with Carla."

She wished he hadn't mentioned Herb. "He's probably ready to come barging through the door after me."

"Good. We'll give him a lesson."

Paula forced a little laugh at the picture of Herb learning to dance. "He'd probably set a record for being the worst pupil you ever had. Next to me, I mean."

"You're doing fine. Just remember to relax."

"I keep thinking I'm going to step on your feet."

"Why do you think I had you take off your shoes?"

They laughed at that, then stood smiling at each other, she with her head tilted to one side so that her hair swung over one shoulder, he with his

head thrown back to reveal little shadows beneath his jaw. There was a deep cleft in his chin that she hadn't noticed before. When he moved back to the phonograph, she realized how very close to her he had been standing.

"This time around, we'll be a little more fancy. Just stay with the beat and follow me."

"I probably can't," she said quickly.

"Sure you can. You might even win the trophy tonight."

"Oh, no. No, really. I couldn't. Not with people watching." But even as she shrank from the thought of it, she could see herself in her blue dress, plucked from the dark and crowded room by a sudden pool of light, the spotlight following her as she threaded her way between the tables to where he waited on the empty dance floor, smiling and swaying just a little, while the music surged and the spotlight held them in its magic circle and everybody clapped.

"I couldn't," she said again. "Not in front of all those people."

"You think Arthur Murray's going to be watching? I'll tell you something, Paula. You're as good a dancer as anyone else here."

"No, really. I couldn't."

"Sure you can." He winked. "You know what else you can do?" He stepped closer and circled her waist with his arm.

"What?" What was he going to say?

"You can stop saying--No, really."

"Oh." She wanted to ask him what he meant; she felt inept and clumsy as he took her hand again and led her into the music.

And now she knew a sense of being two people, able to see herself standing sternly on the sidelines, watching, while a part of the watcher splintered off into a stranger who moved in the circle of Billy Balin's arms.

But this stranger was herself, whirling around the room in her stocking feet, another man's arm warm on her back, feet together, two, three, bending to the pressure of that arm, turn, step, step, to his demand that she take off her shoes, that she say this and not say that, step, two, three, relax, relax, she couldn't breathe and he probably knew that she couldn't breathe.

She stopped in the middle of a turn and pulled back, away from him.

"Good, good. You're doing great. Want to try it once more?"

She swallowed once, audibly, with her eyes shut, and could see the waves pounding against the sandy shore to the beat of the music. "No," she said loudly, breathing hard and opening her eyes, her gaze burning into the soft flesh around his nose. "No, really. No, really, I don't."

He smiled just a little, in a manner polite as it was intimate. "When you say it like that, it's fine."

They had decorated the main hall for the evening with a harvest motif. Paper leaves were strewn on the tables and great bunches of straw hung from the rafters. Fall had always depressed her, and even this fabricated autumn haunted her with the threat of approaching winter. The rain had continued throughout the day; beneath the murmur of the crowd, she could sense its remorseless beat, auguring the gray months ahead, the brittle, darkened afternoons cut by wind. Her anxiety had concentrated into a pulse in her stomach. She squinted through the smoke-filled air, wishing that she had not been so foolish as to leave her glasses in the cabin.

"I-17," called the hostess at the microphone.
"I-17."

"Bingo!" A woman at the next table jumped up, waving her card. She made her way to the front of the room. "What do I win? A silver hayseed?"

A roar of laughter thickened the air. "We're hicks from the sticks," someone shouted. "Fifteen silver hayseeds to the lady in the balcony."

"I want to make bingo," Carla whined. "Let me too."

"You said it," Herb told her. "That card cost your old man two bucks a throw. Let's see some action on it."

Carla chewed on the end of a curl, a sure sign she was tired. "I want your card, Daddy."

A crowd of latecomers brushed their table.

"If it isn't Curly Carla, the ping-pong kid," cried one of the men. "How're you doing, Carla?"

Herb looked up. "Hey, Joe. Have a seat." He slid his chair over to make room. "Joe, meet Paula. Joe gave Carla and me a little workout this morning."

Chairs scraped on the bare floor.

"Pleased to meet you. This is my wife Stacy."

Carla tossed a curl back over her shoulder. "Hi, Joe."

Joe's wife grimaced. "Isn't this noise ghastly?" She shed her mink stole and rested her elbows on the table. "Get me a drink, honey."

Joe half-stood and signaled a waiter. "Scotch all around and a gingerale for the little girl." He glanced down at Paula. "Scotch okay?"

"Oh, yes. Fine. Thank you."

There was a humming as the hostess adjusted the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen," she cried above the disorder, "please, may I have your attention? Ladies and gentlemen!"

The roar subsided to a steady murmur. The guests looked up, passive.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The next game will be a coverall for the grand prize of two-hundred dollars. Every number on your card must be covered. This will be our last game for the evening. You are all cordially invited to remain for the dancing under the direction of our own Billy Balin."

Paula jerked her head around, but the room was a blob of indistinguishable faces. She felt a headache coming on.

"N-35. N-35."

"That's the first time they've called that one all evening," Herb muttered, bending over his card.

"You didn't miss nothing by coming late."

The bare-shouldered Stacy lit a cigarette. "We were in the cocktail lounge. They've got a new piano player." She turned back to Paula. "Is this your first summer here?"

"Yes."

"Don't miss the piano player."

"B-9. B-9."

"Come on, come on," grumbled Herb. "Let's have a little action on the O's. Two-hundred smackeroots. Come on, come on."

"Fix my card, Mommy." Carla rubbed her eyes.

Paula's headache mounted, pulling with it a tide of nausea.

Joe drained the last of his drink. "Another round, everyone?" He looked at Paula.

"No. No, thank you."

"Sure?"

"No. No, really."

Carla fidgeted on her chair. "Let's go."

Stacy peered at the child. "It's past somebody's bedtime. Somebody's tired."

"I want to go," the child repeated.

Herb looked up. "Maybe you should stick her in bed? Joe says they got a sitter service. All you do

is ring the desk."

Everyone at the table was looking at her, waiting for her to do something. Those two strangers and Herb. What would Herb look like to her if she had never seen him before? What if she were Joe-- or Stacy? What would she think of him then?

Carla leaned against Herb's arm, sucking on the curl again.

We bought the new dress, Carla, just for tonight. You were going to be the prettiest little girl in the room.

"She can sleep late in the morning," Paula said with a tight little smile. "Carla doesn't want to go to bed yet, does she? She's going to dance with Daddy like a big lady."

"We never bring ours," said Stacy. The mink stole touched her back lightly; her fingernails were long and oval and very red.

"O-75. O-75."

"Bingo!" someone called from across the room.

"Bingo!"

"Damn it!" Herb pushed his card from him.

"Six bucks shot to hell."

The microphone hummed again, touching a nerve between her eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! We will have more bingo tomorrow night, immediately following dinner. Thank you very much. And now-- here's Billy!" The hostess extended her arm to him, backing off the dance floor.

"Thank you, thank you." Through the blur, Paula could make out his easy, loose-gaited stride. She wondered if he had been in the room all evening.

"Good evening to you all. Congratulations to the winners--and to the losers, remember, it's only money."

Scattered laughter.

"I hope that you all enjoyed our afternoon of good weather. It took a little doing, but the management was able to fix it with the weather bureau. We're trying to swing a deal for next summer--going to buy them out."

The laughter dipped to a rumble. Paula felt a dampness spreading across her forehead. His voice was as she remembered it, but he seemed remote from his counterpart of the morning, impersonally bland as a T.V. performer.

Herb poked her with an elbow. "For Christ's sake, Paula. Take the kid to bed. She's dead on her feet."

He was right. Carla's head hung limply, her mouth lax.

"--hope that no one has heard it before. So I said to him--"

Joe stirred in his chair. "That big phoney. Billy Bullshit, that's what they ought to call him. He gets worse every year."

His wife rearranged the mink over her shoulders. "What do you care? He's not trying to make out with you."

The pulse in Paula's stomach engulfed the pounding in her head. She was going to be sick, right here in front of them.

"--and while the rest of you were stymied by the weather, I was making a little sunshine down in the studio. So now, without any further ado, let me introduce some of my charming partners of the day as they give a little demonstration of what I've taught them. In case anyone is worried, I'm speaking of dance steps only."

Carla burrowed her head into her mother's lap, nudged from sleep by the rough edges of laughter.

"We'll start the evening with some fancy swing steps." Billy scanned the giant knot of faces.

"Paula Bromson, are you ready?"

For a numb span of seconds, Paula sat petrified by the sound of her own name, dimly conscious of Herb's startled glance.

"Come on, Paula. A big hand to the little lady, folks."

She rose abruptly. The child jerked to sudden consciousness, clutching after her mother's skirts. The dance floor seemed miles away, and Paula moved slowly through the maze of tables and sprawling legs, her head down. The floor was damp in spots, tracked with grey mud and bits of dried leaves. Familiar faces floated up from the half-dark to meet her lowered gaze--the trophy winner from the night before, the lady with the lacquered hair who had spoken to Carla in the dining hall--all motionless and secure around small tables. As she passed, they eyed her steadily, and somehow it was backwards, a cruel reversal: the knowing and the suave had changed the rules and sat now in anonymous judgment while she was led before them.

She turned back, faltering, but the faces had melted into a huge mosaic of bobbing pink and white splotches.

"Relax," Billy Balin said softly. "Just remember to relax."

The band had begun to play, and the music was smooth against her ragged thoughts. The dance floor was a small clearing of safety, feet apart, turn, two, three, dear God, it was going to be all right, she was doing it right, her dress was billowing out as she twirled around.

Beneath the satin curve of music, she heard a child whimper, then wail, "Mama, mama." A little titter washed up on the dance floor island and she twisted her head, trying to see into the darkness for a terrible, raw moment. But Billy reached out a hand and spun her toward him. The spotlight washed them in its pool of pink light, and she rested her left arm across Billy Balin's shoulders, her fingers touching the back of his neck, lightly touching, touching, while the music curved still further upward, polishing the very air like sunlight.

VIEWPOINTS

I

Dr. Stoffner leans across his desk, brows raised, eyeing me steadily over the rims of his half-glasses. He smiles quizzically, the smile curling to the left, then fading. I have seen him offer that same fleeting smile to patients and their solemn, hovering families.

I smile back and cross my legs, smoothing my skirt. It is only nine in the morning, but I am already dressed--dressed up--wearing nylons and high heels and my gray suit, a cameo brooch on the lapel.

"I'd like to see you back in the department," Dr. Stoffner says and clears his throat. "I thought of you immediately when the position opened up. But I need someone full time. You can understand that."

"Of course. Yes. It's just that I feel full

time already--at home." Even as I answer, I am thinking of Mrs. Bender, who charges three dollars an hour to babysit for Bennett. When I get home, I will find her on the couch watching television.

"I'm sorry."

I refrain from telling him how sorry, for Dr. Stoffner is a busy man, head of the rehabilitation center of the hospital, and I have already taken thirty minutes of his time. But I permit myself a moment of longing for this other world which is no longer mine, for patients rigid with the struggle to capture the shapes of forgotten words, for the tidy office where I filed my responsibilities in manilla folders at the end of every afternoon.

Dr. Stoffner clears his throat again and gathers some papers from his desk, rattling them thinly between his fingers. His wife and children smile fixedly from a silver frame on his desk. "Well. There's still time for you to reconsider. The new wing isn't scheduled for completion until spring, as I told you. Realistically, I'm hoping for June. Think about it." He seesaws a gold pencil between his fingers so that it drums the desk in staccato taps.

"I will," I answer with a little laugh. "Ad

infinitum."

"The job won't be here ad infinitum." He slips off his glasses and sets them on top of a thick blue book lying on his desk, its spine towards me. I can read the title: Cortical Function and Neuromuscular Activity. The words are familiar, yet remote, like phrases of a foreign language studied long ago. "We need someone with your training and experience, especially with aphasics. But I don't anticipate any difficulties in filling the position."

"I've been thinking about working with a few people in my home," I offer. "Until Bennett's a little older--in school all day--"

"Well. Of course. That's always an option." He rises and extends his hand across the desk. "As I said, think about it. Thanks for coming in."

Mute with ambivalence, I stand and take his hand. "Thank you for your time," I finally say.

My high heels click briskly on the terrazzo floor in the corridor. I punch the "Down" button for the elevator and watch the floor indicators above the stainless steel doors. Both elevators are stalled on the ground level. I watch unblinkingly, as if my careful attention will draw one upwards. After several seconds, I find the stairwell and walk the

three flights down.

II

Bennett is home from nursery school with the flu, his nose stuffy, his eyes watery. He has been home for three days now, puttering with watercolors and Play-Dough, with scissors, paste, and puzzles. He has built a fort out of the cushions from the living room couch and chairs, frosted a batch of cookies, counted the tissues in a new box of Kleenex. "What can I do, Mom?" he says again and again. Now he sits slumped on his bed against the pillows. We have been playing Fish for endless hours, game upon game.

He tries to peer over the top of my cards, which are fanned neatly and grouped by rank. "Do you have any sixes?" His voice is flat and muffled.

"No, fish." I perch on the mattress edge, shoulders straight, one foot pulled back and the other leg extended, ready to spring at any second into the hall where the vacuum cleaner stands, its hose twisted into a giant knot.

Bennett leans forward to pull a card from the pile, then throws himself back against the pillows,

waiting.

"Do you have any twos?" I ask.

He has arranged his cards in crooked rows behind a mound of blankets, and he examines each one at length. "No. Fish."

Somewhere, deep within the house, a pipe whines and rattles as the furnace clicks on.

At noon, we sit at the kitchen table, Bennett leaning forward on his elbows, sliding the butter dish back and forth, back and forth between his hands. He says his throat hurts, but he chatters on and on, his voice ragged and thin and insistent against the stillness. There is a new boy in school, he says, whose name is Ross. Where did that boy get such a funny name? When will the swimming pools open? Why does a cold make you sneeze?

"Ummm," I murmur into a momentary pause, glancing quickly up from the morning paper and then back. Jimmy Carter smiles out from the front page, a smear of red jelly on his forehead. Bennett's chatter resumes. I reach for my coffee. "Ummm, ummm," I say, still reading.

My son leans across the table, thrusting his face close to mine, his eyebrows lifted, eyes wide. "Well? Well? Well?" His voice grows louder with

each syllable. Back and forth goes the butter dish.

"Well, what?" I lower my coffee cup to its saucer, and, sighing, look up. The pale winter sun streams through the window. On the other side of the glass, there is the world, brisk with icicles and the hum of tires. A woman scurries along the curb to catch a bus, waving a gloved hand. Her leather boots glint in the sunlight as she runs.

"Well, what's the answer?" Bennett says.

I turn back to the kitchen. The table is rough with toast crumbs and spilled corn flakes. "Ummm?"

"Tell me the answer," he repeats.

"Tell me the question."

Bennett presses his lips together and breathes hard, sniffing. "You're not listening to me. You didn't hear me at all." He sucks in a quick breath, inching closer across the table and scattering the crumbs. "You just sat there with your paper, going hummm, hummm, ummm. Going like a harmonica."

Downstairs, the dryer pings loudly, signalling a finished load. Upstairs, the vacuum cleaner waits in its knotted heap.

Five minutes later, we are playing Fish.

III

The room is crowded, and my voice feels tight with effort. From the next room, piano notes segue in and under the sounds of the party, the melody stifled beneath uneven bursts of laughter and chatter. I take some nuts from a glass dish and retreat to an empty chair, chewing one nut at a time. Few of the faces are familiar; I observe the other guests with the alert detachment of someone watching a barely audible play, still remembering yesterday's telephone conversation with Dr. Stoffner. Should I have written instead of called? No. The reasons for my decision were too elusive and shapeless to fill the conventions of a business letter. Yet I feel uneasy.

The woman standing to my right is turned away, talking to a knot of people in tones steady and low as the hum of neon lights. She holds a cocktail glass in one hand, gesturing with it to accentuate a point. I watch the amber liquid (Scotch? bourbon?) slosh perilously near the rim. As she swings her arm towards me, the glass tilts, and the liquor splashes on to my pink skirt.

She turns. "Did I--?" We both stare at my

lap where the spill has spread to a dark, elongated stain. With a wadded napkin she dabs at the spot. "I'm terribly sorry." Her remark is less an apology than an assertion, tinged with the finality of a newscaster summing up the day's events. Other women crowd forward, offering napkins and advice.

"Rinse it with cold water."

"Oh, no. Just blot it well and let it dry."

I look up at the circle of faces, feeling clumsy, as if the accident were my fault. "It'll be okay. The skirt needed cleaning anyway," I say.

The woman takes one more swipe with her napkin and settles herself upon the arm of my chair, finishing off the rest of her drink as she sits. She introduces herself, swallowing the syllables of her name along with her cocktail. I am not sure if she has said Jean or Jane. I tell her my name and eat the last of my nuts, brushing the salt from my palms.

"You look so familiar," she says, tilting her head back and squinting at me steadily, like a painter positioning her subject. "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so."

"Have I seen you around campus? In the faculty lunchroom?"

"No."

"Oh. I thought perhaps you were connected with the university."

"No, I'm not. Are you?"

She nods, adding that she is an associate professor of speech and did her graduate work at Stanford. I prepare to lay out my credentials, rusty as they are, when a woman standing behind us leans forward and touches Jean's/Jane's shoulder. "I'm Sal Rothman. English department. I've been wanting to meet you ever since I read your book last month."

The two women shake hands, and Jean repeats her name, this time distinctly. Despite my determination to remain aloof, I am impressed. "You've written a book?"

"A wonderful, perceptive book," says Sal, raising her wine glass in a sort of toast. I eye the glass warily. It is directly over my knees. "The Golden Silence."

I shift my knees to the left. "A novel?"

Jean stands and shakes her head. "A text. On non-verbal communication. Sort of a rehash," she adds, "of my dissertation."

There is a moment of non-verbal respect. "We're in related fields," Sal says. She is looking at me, but I assume she is talking to Jean, since I have not

yet declared my field. "I'm a linguist. English department. Assistant professor, down at the bottom of the heap."

The women smile at each other and then down at me, acknowledging my turn to speak.

"A linguist," I offer in my most thoughtful, intelligent tone. I am not sure what the term implies. I would have guessed that a linguist was someone fluent in foreign languages, but Sal is with the English department. "How did you get interested in the field?"

Sal sets down her glass and adjusts an earring. As she raises her arm, I can see a tiny rip in the seam of her blouse. Somehow, I feel reassured. "Good question," she says. "Actually, I started with the metaphysical poets, but through some work with ESL--"

"ESL?" I ask. "A government agency?"

She laughs as if I made a very witty remark. "English as a second language. A fairly new field. Wide-open."

"EFL," Jean says, explaining further.

English as frantic language? English as a frequent language? "Oh," I say. "I see."

Again the women smile down at me. "What do you

do?" says Sal, tucking her blouse into the band of her skirt just as the hostess scurries past with a tray of stuffed mushrooms. Jean stands and the two women turn to take mushrooms from the tray, commenting on the lovely party, on the wines and cheeses which they have already sampled from the lovely buffet.

"I am a speech pathologist," I will say when they turn back from the mushrooms. "I have a master's degree from Michigan and have published an article on left-hemisphere stroke victims, and I just turned down a very good job."

Jean perches again on the arm of my chair and wipes the corners of her mouth carefully with her forefinger. "Did you say that you were with the university?"

From across the room, my husband lifts an eyebrow at me and raises his chin, a non-verbal message that means he is ready to leave. I rise. "No. No, I didn't."

Sal retrieves her wine glass, which is still half-full. "What do you do?" she asks.

I nod quickly to my husband, and he offers his hand to the man next to him, a firm gesture of farewell. "Oh," I say, rising and giving my damp skirt

a little shake, "mostly I do the laundry." The two women freeze politely, waiting for the explanation that will permit them to laugh at my small joke. I glance around for the hostess, and then turn back. "I'm a housewife," I say, intending to strike just the right note of flippancy, but my voice trails upwards, defensive and apologetic. The three of us exchange one final, careful smile before I move across the room to where my husband waits.

IV

Bennett and I are going raspberry picking. The woods behind our house, stretching south and east down to the creek, are full of treasures. It is mid-July, time for our annual hunt. Bennett is five this summer, and he insists on carrying a separate pail.

"Don't hold my hand, Mom," he says, pulling loose and running ahead. I duck beneath some low-hanging branches to follow him down a steep, narrow trail. His overalls, new last fall, expose a full inch of stocking above his shoe tops.

The steamy evening is thick as fog. Mosquitos hang on the moist air, buzzing endlessly in a holding pattern. This is my first foray into the woods for

the season, and the underbrush is taller and thicker than I remembered. In some places, the weeds are over Bennett's head. He plunges into them and disappears, like a swimmer wading out to sea. Only the green ripples above his head mark his presence. His voice floats up, disembodied. He is full of plans for his raspberries: he is going to have them for breakfast, he is going to make a pie, he is going to sell raspberries door-to-door and earn fifty dollars.

The dense undergrowth has obscured the familiar paths, and we wander aimlessly. We find a patch of wild tiger lilies, a swampy cluster of ferns, but few raspberries--barely enough to cover the bottom of my pail. Twigs and dried leaves snap beneath our feet; brambles snag our jeans. Bennett emerges from a thicket of sumac, burrs in his hair and a scratch on his cheek. His pail is full of wild purple flowers.

"What's the name of this flower?"

"I don't know."

He raises a bloom to his nose, sniffing deeply, then touches it with his tongue. The woods are suffocating. His face perspires with a moony glow, his nose runs. He wipes his nose and beaded lip on his shirt sleeve.

"Don't do that. It isn't nice."

"I haven't got a Kleenex."

Neither have I. He takes another swipe with his shirt sleeve.

We stumble along again, staying together now. The ground underfoot is uneven, the dips hidden by the weeds. I stop for breath, and Bennett looks up. "What are we waiting for?"

"My second wind."

"Are we lost?"

"No."

We breaststroke through the tall weeds without talking. Somewhere around the corner is the concrete-gridded city, but here in the fading light there is only tangled greenery and suspended clouds of gnats. I am sure this is the way home, but nothing looks familiar. Then suddenly the weeds thin, the terrain levels, and we emerge on the street behind our house, directly opposite our intended destination.

Across the way a small boy sits on the curb, immobile as the lamp post against which he leans. He eyes us soberly from beneath an even blond fringe.

"What's his name?" he pipes.

Bennett swivels his head, glancing behind him.

Who is the boy talking to?

"His name is Bennett."

"Mine's Joey." He puffs out his chest, smoothing his grubby tee shirt with spread fingers. In faded blue print are the letters of his name. "I'm waiting for my dad."

I smile, Bennett stares.

The child points at my son. "How old's he?"

Bennett opens his mouth to answer, then looks to me for a voice.

"He's five. How old are you?"

"Four."

He looks small for four. "When will you be five?"

The child's eyebrows disappear into his bangs.

"I don't know."

Bennett slides me a bursting smile that compresses his lips and lights his eyes. He has known his birthdate for as long as he can remember. We nod to the child and walk on, Bennett swaggering ahead and singing a litany of our family's birthdays.

Back home, we perch on the sundeck off the living room. He empties the raspberries from my pail into a little heap and with solemn intensity divides them into two equal shares, the tip of his

tongue moving slowly between his lips, left to right, right to left, his eyes shifting from pile to pile. Indicating my portion with a little flap of his elbow, he attacks his own with both hands, popping the berries into his mouth one after the other. Finishing his, he begins to eat mine without asking.

"What do you call those pillows in the middle of the raspberries?" He pulls the object in question from his stained mouth, dripping juice.

(I don't call them anything.) "The core of the raspberry."

Soon we have polished off our harvest, even the broken crumbles. Bennett rubs the saddle of freckles across the bridge of his nose. "I feel sad. The raspberries are all gone." His hands are stubby and boyish, no longer dimpled.

"We'll get more another night."

He shakes his head slowly and pulls off a blue, thick-soled tennis shoe to examine the toe of his sock. "No."

"Why not? Of course we will. There are lots or raspberries in those woods."

He smiles wistfully in the half-dark and cocks his head to one side, his gaze distant and

thoughtful. "That little kid won't be sitting there."

"Time for your bath," I say, my bright and coppery tone fading as I watch him gather up his shoes and pail. Together, we go inside.

MISS NEWLEY: A MEMOIR

Her name was Miss Rosalind Newley. I have not seen her for years, but caught by memory at unexpected moments, I imagine glimpses of her on crowded downtown sidewalks or across the aisles of darkened theatres. Today I thought I heard her voice behind me in a busy cafeteria line and for a frozen instant I seesawed between expectation and apprehension. What would I say to her? What does one say to a memory?

When I first met Miss Newley, I was twelve years old and passing through that period of hushed expectancy when all things were possible, nothing certain. She was my first drama teacher, a distaff Pied Piper who knew the way to strange, bewitching places, into which she invited me with a promise of grandeur. "I can see you as Becky Thatcher," she would murmur, touching my long blond braids. "You

could play Sarah Crewe or Amy March." I imagined my favorite characters from my favorite books bow splendidly for curtain calls, each my twin, while Miss Newley applauded from the wings.

I thought she was beautiful. Her sweaters were the astonishing colors of tulips, adorned at the neck with a string of pearls or a gold locket on a heavy chain; she had gray, shoulder-length hair in a page-boy cut which she constantly finger-combed back from her cheek. Her face was heavily pocked, her ankles too thick, but she smelled like early summer, and she could arch one eyebrow independently of the other, narrowing her gray gaze into the distance where, I was sure, she perceived secrets hidden from ordinary people.

Our class met on Tuesday afternoons after school. I clocked the time between sessions with yearning impatience, counting off the days and then (on Tuesdays) the hours, until the class was over for another week and I had to begin my calculations anew.

There were eight or ten of us in the class, with names like Byron Ringland and Gwyda Donhowe. We were her oldest group, a privileged elite. We could hope for leads in all the plays ("Oh, Tom

Sawyer," Becky cried from center stage as the lights began to dim at the end of Act I, "how could you be so noble?") and we shared glimpses into Miss Newley's private life. The intrigue of algebra and touch typing dwindled to insignificance in her presence, like a city viewed from an airplane.

She had studied under Maria Ouspenskia, who in turn had been a disciple of the great Stanislavski. We were linked to immortals. She was privy to amusing anecdotes about the great and near-great; she taught us words whose rhythms were a hymn--cyclorama, counterbalance, diaphragmatic breathing. Other gray-haired ladies I knew were obsessed with ordered closets and spotless walls, but Miss Newley kept her office in marvelous disarray. Playscripts with torn covers, purple dittoes, and chiffon scarves were heaped on shelves or chairs. Her desk drawers overflowed with photographs and rhinestone jewelry. Everything about her was tousled and perfect.

I tried without success to picture her doing common things like brushing her teeth and eating breakfast, sifted through every detail I knew about her and burned to know more. Who were her friends, how did she spend her evenings? Her romantic life in particular piqued my curiosity. Why had she never

married? I imagined passionate love affairs-- intense but doomed.

Only once did she hint at any such relationship. "He was one of the finest actors I have ever known," she mused into her private horizon one Tuesday afternoon. "What was his name?" A frown. "I should remember. It started with an M. I was engaged to him for a year." She shifted her gaze to us and shrugged. "Oh, well."

What was his name? Morris? Michael? Milton? "Marvin, darling, we must part. My life is the theatre; I cannot marry you." Or perhaps Mr. M. had been the one to say goodbye: "We cannot continue in this manner any longer, Rosalind. You will always belong to the theatre--never to me."

Miss Newley's tastes in literature were eclectic, and she led us through improvisations of oddly assorted stories. We attacked fairy tales from Grimm and Strindberg's Spook Sonata with indiscriminate gusto, always aiming to be believable. That was her word. She never said we were good or bad, only that she believed us--or didn't. If her belief was strong, she called us by the name of the character we had just created. "Yes, Becky, the darkness in the cave was very real. I believed you."

Sometimes we created our own stories from Miss Newley's exercises. A favorite game depended upon single words or phrases written upon slips of folded paper which we drew from her hand. We were each to create a scene in pantomime, speaking only what we had found on our papers. "Hello" and "Goodbye" were easy ones, but sooner or later, we all drew, "It's a stone!" That was the hardest one, but we were equal to it. "It's a stone!" we cried in successive triumph, finding the object first in edibles and shoes, and, then, as we grew more adept, in stalled engines and anesthetized patients.

Once, however, we transgressed irrevocably by burlesquing the exercise. We had been improvising the death scene from Winterset, one of our favorites, and had offered the wounded hero Garth a solemn glass of water and an arm crooked for his head. Then Gwyda pressed to his lips an object so crudely pantomimed that it might have been anything--a chalice or a head of lettuce.

"What--what is it?" gasped the dying Garth.

We looked at each other, stumped; even Gwyda seemed not to know what her clenched fingers held. We looked at each other again.

"It's a stone!" we burst out with unpremeditated

glee; then, shrill with hilarity, we broke character and laughed helplessly at our own cleverness.

Miss Newley was not amused. She took her theatre seriously, like religion. Her smiles were trophies awarded not for wit but excellence. She was silent during the scene. When we finished ("Are you quite done?"), she made her way to the front of the little theatre and with her narrowed gray gaze froze us in our absurd tableau. Large tears slid down her cheeks, and her soft hands hung at her sides. There were several paralyzed moments while the world stopped. Then she pivoted on her high heels and swished out of the room. We remained penitent for months, awed by the enormity of our sacrilege.

By spring, we began to prepare for a three-act play, a genuine play with costumes and an audience and lines to be memorized. When Miss Newley announced that her choice was Tom Sawyer--not Aladdin or Mr. Dooley as I had feared--I swelled with anticipation. For two weeks, we submitted to the interminable ritual of tryouts.

"Read Becky on page forty-two," Miss Newley would say from a far row in the theatre, consulting her notes, suddenly our judge and censor. "Page forty-two

from the top."

Becky: Tom, Tom, we're lost! We're lost! We
can never get out of this awful place!
(In despair) Oh, why did we ever leave
the others! (Sinks to ground and weeps)

I listened sharply to my classmates' voices and to my own, straining to catch a flat interpretation or a misplaced nuance. In private, I replayed my readings in my head, soothed one moment by confidence, numbed the next by doubt. When the casting list was posted, there was my name opposite: "Mrs. Harper, one of the townspeople." Gwyda was to play Becky.

I tried to hate Miss Newley and my friend who had stolen my role, grimly noting the contrast between Becky Thatcher's starched and ruffled pinafore and my own costume, a shapeless dress fashioned from curtain material that gaped at the neck and raveled at the hem. While Gwyda bowed center stage to a crescendo of applause, I took my curtain call from the back row of the assembled cast. But the ice of my bitterness melted in the glow of Miss Newley's approval.

"You were very believable," she murmured to me after our first performance. "I was proud of

you."

"I only have three lines," I countered, determinedly sullen. "And one of them is from offstage."

"Remember what Stanislavski said," Miss Newley answered softly, smiling at me for a long moment.

"There are no small parts. Only small actors. Your character has dimension. I believed you." How could I not smile back? I believed her, too.

Our class met weekly all through high school, but finally time claimed us, and we scattered across the country to pursue individual lives. I was the only one of us to settle in our hometown. Byron Ringland became a director on the west coast, Gwyda a professional actress in New York.

When Gwyda opened in her first Broadway play, I was in New York and scoured Manhattan for an appropriate gift, finally coming upon it in a Japanese flower shop on upper Manhattan: a smooth, flat agate pebble. Elaborately wrapped with a card that read, "It's a stone," it was a reminder of our childhood dreams that promised we would all someday be famous.

I last saw Miss Newley some years ago when I appeared in a play at the local community theatre. I had not known she was in the audience until she

came backstage after the final curtain. I was married by then, the mother of two children, caught up in a world that she no longer controlled, but when I saw her threading her way through the crowd, the present ebbed and I panicked. What did she think of my performance? What would she say?

She put a hand on my shoulder for a brief, smiling moment. Her hair had whitened a shade, but otherwise she had changed very little. "I'm Rosalind Newley," she said. "Do you remember me?"

Before I could reply, a crowd of well-wishers pressed forward, separating us, and when I turned back, she had disappeared, without waiting for my answer. Perhaps she knew that some things are never forgotten.

VISITING HOURS

The old man in the hospital bed stirred impatiently and tugged at the rumpled sheet. "What time is it, Esther?"

His wife studied the solitaire game laid out before her on a table and shrugged without looking up, then leaned back in the chair, knees apart and ankles crossed. The chair creaked.

"A little before seven."

"Already so late?"

"You been sleeping since they took away the dinner tray, Ben." She poked at the dog-eared cards with a stubby finger. "I won two games in a row while you was sleeping. This one, I'm stuck."

Ben groaned softly and raised himself up on one elbow. "Nobody came? Not even Irving or Eddie?"

"Don't worry. It's early. Not seven o'clock yet. People don't come so early. They got to have

time to finish supper, clean up a little." Esther gathered up the cards and shoved them to one side of the table. "I can't do nothing this game. All the aces was buried."

Her husband groaned again and moved restlessly beneath the white sheets. "My legs feel like hot needles is stuck in them."

Esther heaved herself from the chair. "Maybe you want some water?"

"I'm telling her I can't stand it from the pain," Ben said to an invisible presence at the foot of his bed, "and she tells me to have some water."

"A little water wouldn't hurt you." She crossed to the night table, her hands hovering above the pitcher.

"I don't want it," Ben insisted as Esther tipped the pitcher so that the water splashed untidily into a glass. "I'm not a bathtub that you should fill me up all the time with water. You want to do me a favor, call Dr. Adelman. The pain is killing me."

"Call the doctor he says," Esther repeated to the unseen arbitrator at the foot of the bed. "Who can get in touch with the doctor so late? The telephone number at his house is a big secret and at

his office answers an operator to take a message. A person could be choking to death, they'd have to leave a message. So what can I do? We have to wait for tomorrow to see the doctor." She lifted the glass and held it with both hands. "Maybe the legs went to sleep while you was sleeping. Have a little water, I'll rub them."

Ben's jaw went lax, and another groan sputtered deep in his throat. The loose skin of his neck quivered. "Tell the nurse to call the doctor."

Deliberately, Esther floated a bent drinking straw in the brimming glass. "One little sip, you'll feel better."

"At least call Irving. See if he and Bessie is on the way."

"Why call? If they left, they left. If they didn't leave yet, they didn't leave." Esther's speech, marked by little explosions of "t's" and "d's," carried traces of her Eastern European origin. "What's to call?"

The old man waved his hand as if to brush away his wife's logic. His fingers hit the glass, and some water sloshed over the rim.

"You don't want the water?" Esther asked, making a question of the statement and trailing the

last syllable upward in two gliding notes.

"Okay, okay. I'll have a little water." Ben leaned forward to suck from the straw without taking the glass.

Esther moved the glass out of his reach.

"Maybe you'd rather have some 7-Up? The nurses told me, any time you want a little 7-Up, they'll bring."

"What I want is you should ask the nurse where was Dr. Adelman today. I'm a sick man." Panting dryly, he closed his eyes. "I'm a sick man," he repeated, his voice rising thin and nasal. A sudden cough seized him, and his breathing grew rougher.

"Okay, . . . I'll go. Don't get excited." She set the glass upon the night table and crossed to the door, her step slow and heavy; her shoes cut into her fleshy feet. She peered into the hall as if to hail a passing nurse and then turned back, catching a straggling lock of hair with a bobby pin. "Do I look all right?"

"You look okay. Go already."

Esther turned to the door again just as the elevator across the hall clanked open. Her face brightened as a slender woman carrying a fur jacket stepped out. "Helen!" she exclaimed,

embracing the woman, who first struggled in surprise and then, recognizing Esther, returned the embrace gingerly, holding her fur to one side and leaning forward to cock a cheek to Esther's lips.

"Hello, Esther dear."

"We wasn't expecting you." Esther held her friend at arm's length, examining in one fluid glance Helen's blue-gray hair shored up in tortoise combs, the blue knit suit and dark fur jacket. "Beautiful. Everything matches. Come in and say hello to Ben."

Helen shifted her fur to her other arm and raised her eyebrows. "Ben's back again?"

"You didn't know it?"

"Esther, dear, I've been run ragged this week. Completely out of touch."

Esther clasped her hands together at the waist. "What's the matter?" Her question was less a question than a statement: something is the matter, it said.

"It's Sidney," Helen replied. "He's in room 306."

"Sidney's in the hospital? I didn't know it. I hope it's nothing serious." Esther's eyebrows lifted expectantly.

"He had a cyst removed. Nothing major, you

know. But he's been putting it off and putting it off, so finally I said to him, 'Sidney, you can't let these things go.'" Helen took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "So--here I am."

"That's too bad," said Esther. "I suppose he'll be going home soon." Her tone was shaded with disappointment.

"In a couple days, God willing. The hospital's no place for a sick person, I always say." Helen ran her finger around the inside of her collar. "They keep this place so warm. Honestly. How's Ben this time?"

"His legs, they swelled up like balloons." Esther curved her hands around an imaginary circumference. "That big."

Helen nodded. "That's very common with a bad heart."

"Maybe to you it's common, to me I never saw such a thing in my life. The doctor, he won't tell us nothing--"

"Esther, dear, what can he say?"

"Take a second, say hello to Ben." Esther moved to the doorway of her husband's room, keeping her gaze pinned on her friend. "Ben, it's Helen Siegel."

Ben propped himself up on an elbow, and the

bedclothes rustled.

Helen stuck her head inside the door. "Hello, Ben. Nice to see you."

"Sit down a minute." Esther dragged a chair across the floor and angled it so that it faced the bed. "Talk a little."

"First I have to run down to Sidney's room."

"Just for a second," Esther pleaded.

"If I'm not there on the dot of seven, Sidney gets into a lather." Helen inched towards the door. "I'll drop by later if I can." She escaped into the hallway and then turned back. "If there's anything I can do for you, Esther, just let me know."

In the room, there was a beat of silence. A cart rattled past the door. Slap, slap, slap went someone's shoes down the hall.

Esther moved to the bed and straightened the top sheet. "Sidney had an operation for a cyst. I always thought he was the picture of health. Listen, everyone has troubles."

"A cyst," Ben said scornfully, pulling the sheet up around his chin.

"So? An operation is an operation. Thank God you never needed it. Helen didn't know you was in

the hospital again."

"How would she know? Nobody put it in the paper." He coughed weakly. "I'm waiting you should call the doctor. Tell him he puts me in the hospital, he can at least come around to take a look. I got to tell him about my legs, especially the right one. Ask the nurse, she should call Dr. Adelman."

"All right, I'm going." She started towards the door, but stopped at the threshold and peered to the left after a figure shuffling down the corridor. "Irving? Is it you?"

A short, thin man wearing a loosely fitting overcoat turned at her voice, throwing up his hands in a gesture of relief. The overhead florescent lights cast twin shadows beneath the puffy hammocks of flesh under his eyes; the high bridge of his nose shone narrowly in the glare.

"I was looking for him at the other end of the hall," Irving said, moving haltingly towards Esther as if still confused. "Up and down, up and down. When did they move him?"

"This afternoon," Esther said, leading her brother into the room and taking his coat. "Finally a private room. A hundred-twenty dollars, Irving."

"How do you feel, Ben?" Irving looked around the room, nodding his approval.

"The same as yesterday. Only not so good."

"A hundred-twenty dollars a day, Irving. A day. Not a week, not a month. A day." Esther held the coat out in front of her by the shoulders. "Thank God for Medicare. Where did you get the coat?"

Irving shrugged. "I had it a long time in the closet. I decided to wear it out. You like it?"

"It's too big." She folded the coat into a bulky square and set it at the foot of Ben's bed. "On you it looks still on the hanger."

"He looks okay," Ben said. "I should look so good. Bessie didn't come?"

"She wanted to come, but she doesn't like the hospital. Too many people sick. She says hello." He drew up a straight-backed chair to the bed and perched on the edge of it. "You want to play a little gin? I brought the cards."

"I don't feel like it. My legs is killing me. Irving, you want to make me happy, tell the nurses I got to see the doctor."

"You want to see the doctor now? After supper? Wait for morning. Everybody in the hospital sees

the doctor in the morning."

"There's a rule?" Ben pulled himself to a sitting position. "Tell the legs."

Irving rose quickly and settled his brother-in-law back upon the pillow. "You got a private room now. You should rest. Take advantage."

"The other room, the man snored all night," said Esther, pressing closer to the bed. "Isn't it right, Ben?"

Her husband sighed deeply. "It's a blessing from God, to sleep like that. I don't sleep good any more."

"When he was awake, Irving, not snoring, he talked all the time. Every minute. A terrible thing."

"Irving," breathed Ben urgently. He began to groan, first softly, then with mounting intensity. "Please. The doctor. Tell the nurse I'm a sick man."

Irving stood indecisively, shifting his gaze from his brother-in-law to the door. "You want I should go now?" Ben opened his mouth wide, as if to cry aloud, and Irving patted him hastily on the shoulder. "Okay. I'm going. Wait right there. I'm going." He began to back out of the room, his

eyes fixed upon Ben. "I'm going."

Esther followed him to the door. "Eddie's coming up tonight, Irving. Eddie and Clare. Every night they come."

Nodding, Irving backed up to the door. "You got a good boy." He jerked his head in Ben's direction. "He shouldn't get so excited."

"Look for Eddie in the hall. Maybe he comes and can't find us."

"I'll take a look." He scuttled down the corridor, Esther watching from the doorway, Ben motionless now on the bed, his eyes closed.

For several moments they did not speak. Then Esther lumbered back to her chair and lowered herself slowly into it. "It's a long day in the hospital, nothing to do," she said softly; after a silence, she reached for her husband's hand and held it. They sat for a long while, each staring vacantly ahead as if the opposite wall held answers to shapeless questions.

Suddenly a young couple appeared in the doorway. The man stepped briskly into the room, then turned back to cup his hand under the woman's elbow. He guided her carefully towards the bed. "Hello, Dad," he said with a quick smile. "Here's Clare."

Sorry we're late."

Esther heaved herself out of the chair. "Eddie. Thank God. We was afraid you couldn't find the room." She embraced her daughter-in-law, who kept her hands jammed deep into the pockets of her coat.

Eddie watched the two women dubiously. He drew a sharp breath, as if to speak, just as Irving shuffled in from the hall, his arms extended in greeting.

"Hello, Eddie," he exclaimed. "Your mama was worried you might be lost looking for the room."

Ben touched Eddie's sleeve, then gestured for Irving to come closer. "Every night Eddie comes. Is that a son?"

"That's a son. For sure."

"How do you feel, Dad? You look good."

"Such weather, Clare," Esther said, straightening the girl's collar. "You should wear a scarf on your head. Eddie, why don't you make her wear a scarf?"

"He says I look good," Ben said to Irving.

"All of a sudden, he's a doctor."

"Listen, you look pretty good," Irving answered. "I saw the nurse, she says to tell you you're resting comfortable. But she's calling the doctor anyway."

Right now." He turned to Eddie. "You shouldn't worry, it's not an emergency. But he wanted to talk to the doctor."

"What's the matter, Dad?"

"Oy. He asks me what's the matter. If you see a policeman going to a robbery, are you asking what's the matter? I'm a sick man, son. I got to see the doctor. He didn't come yet today. The next time he comes, I'm telling him, maybe he's too busy and I should find another doctor."

"Your color looks good, Dad. Doesn't Dad look better, Clare?"

Clare had moved to the other side of the room and was perched on the window ledge. "You look good, Dad," she echoed.

"What's so good?" Ben pushed the sheets back. "Look here, son, look at my legs. Like two balloons. I hurt something terrible."

"Did you know about Joe Davidson?" said Irving. He took his coat from the bed. "He dropped dead from his heart last week. I saw him the day before he died, he looked like a million dollars. Everybody said he never looked so good. So who's to know?"

"That's right," Ben said with satisfaction.

"Who knows?"

Esther pressed closer. "What do you think, Eddie? Is the swelling down?"

"Yeah, sure. He looks pretty good."

"Didn't I say so?" Irving moved to the head of the bed and slapped Ben softly on the arm. "He looks like a million dollars."

Ben sneezed, reached for a tissue, and blew his nose loudly. "It's the same with me as yesterday."

"Listen," Irving said, giving his brother-in-law a sly nudge with his elbow, "so terrific you look, you shouldn't get too fresh with the nurses. Well--the nurses, okay--but not the sisters."

"The sisters, they don't know nothing," Ben said. His voice slid down a scale of despair. "I try to get out of bed and they push me back. It weakens a man to be all the time in bed."

Esther crossed the room and smoothed Clare's hair. "So tell me, Clare, what's new?" She turned back to Irving. "Did you know it, Irving, Clare and Eddie are building a new house next month. Isn't it right, Clare?"

"That's right," said Clare from the window ledge.

"A big house, Irving. A fireplace and everything."

Such a house as she tells me--at least ninety-thousand dollars, Clare?"

Clare recrossed her legs. "No, Mom, not that much."

"You told me about it already," said Irving. "How many toilets, Eddie?"

"Three."

"Oh." Irving thought a minute, rubbing his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "Ninety-thousand for sure." He replaced his coat on the bed. "Our Shirley, she writes that she has a new car, David has a new car. Isn't it something how the young people do it today?"

Ben struggled to an upright position. "Don't do it, son. Not more than you can pay off. Twenty-thousand dollars I paid for Mama's house and furniture. Everything the best. That's what done it to me, son. Worry. Grief and worry. But I done it. I had a good life and I finished up what I had to do. But I never thought I could be so weak. I was always stout as a mule."

"You're going to be all right, Dad," Eddie said. He examined his own shoes with intense interest.

"It's got me beat down, that's what." Ben

looked straight at the opposite wall. "My body turned against me. Well, at least I lived to see my son married. That's a blessing from God."

"A blessing from God," Esther mocked. She rose from the window ledge and planted herself in the middle of the room. "A man works hard all his life, comes the time he could enjoy a little, and where is he? In the hospital. Such a blessing."

"Mama," Ben said, "do you remember the first time Eddie brought Clare home? Like a little angel. I said to myself, my son is going to marry that girl. Remember, Eddie?"

"Sure, Dad."

"We all went to the Coach House for dinner. Thirty dollars for dinner, Irving. I'll never forget it as long as I live. Clare, honey, do you remember?"

Clare had moved from the window ledge to the door. "Yes. Yes, I do."

Ben nodded, pleased with her reply. "The minute we saw Clare, Irving, Mama and me went to the jeweler's and bought a gold pin, Eddie should give it to Clare at the Coach House. A fifty-dollar pin. Plus tax. What do you think of it, Irving, to buy a fifty-dollar pin?" He blew his nose again. "That was a lot of money then. A long time ago, Mama."

"Time goes," said Irving.

"We always wanted Eddie should have the best," Esther said. Eddie continued to examine his shoes.

Ben sighed, and the sigh turned into a cough. "I should only live long enough to see the grandson born," he said, his voice ragged. "God willing."

Irving crossed to Clare, extending his hand. "Is that right! Clare, honey, I didn't know it! A big mazeltov."

Clare backed up one step. "No. He's just talking. I mean--"

Eddie looked up from his shoes. "Clare--"

"Listen, Clare," Ben said. He leaned forward, still coughing weakly. "Don't you worry. Mama was thirty-eight and I was forty-six when our Eddie was born. Like a miracle. Don't you worry."

"Nobody's worrying," said Irving, taking his coat again and shrugging into it. "They got plenty time." He turned to Clare. "You got plenty time. You should relax. Enjoy."

"How can she relax?" Esther asked, her voice querulous. "She got a hard job, working in a drug store, on her feet all day--"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Mom," Eddie interrupted. "She doesn't work in a drug store. She's a pharmacist."

You talk like--"

"Okay, a pharmacist. Isn't it in a drug store or not? I'm asking you, Irving, yes or no?"

"Mom, she's got a good job."

"What's such a good job? She has to be all day on her feet."

A stealthy silence crept around the edges of the room, like a nervous cat. No one looked at anyone else. Eddie was the first to speak.

"Who's been up today to visit, Dad? I saw Bert Diamond downtown and he said he was here this morning."

"That's right," Esther said. "But nobody else today. The last time Dad was in the hospital, every night was a room full."

"They send me cards," Ben said. "Nobody got time to come and see me. They got to be here, they got to be there. But I don't blame nobody." He sighed massively. "Listen, if a man's own doctor don't have time to come to the hospital, who can blame an ordinary person?"

"The nurse called him," Irving said, patting his hands against the air, palms down, in a placating gesture. "Any second now, the doctor will be here. Don't get excited."

"I'll go check with the nurse," Eddie said.

Esther looked up at her son. "Why don't you take off your coat?" But even as she spoke, he sidled out of the room and disappeared into the hall.

Suddenly Esther clapped her hands together. "I forgot to tell you, Clare, Sidney Siegel had a terrible operation for a cyst. Isn't it right, Ben?"

"That's too bad," said Irving. "Bessie's brother Myron in Los Angeles had the same thing. Where was the cyst?"

Esther shrugged, frowning. "Who knows? Inside someplace."

"Myron's cyst, excuse me, was in a place I wouldn't mention." He cast an apologetic glance at Clare, who was staring out into the corridor. "Well, I got to go. Bessie gets nervous if I'm too long gone. You want I should drive you home, Esther? It's too cold for the bus."

"Everybody goes?" said Ben. "So soon?"

Esther settled back into her chair. "Wait a little longer, Irving."

They all turned their faces to the door, expressionless and impassive, saying nothing, waiting

for Eddie as if his return would signal new hope. In the distance an ambulance siren wailed insistently. Then suddenly, Eddie strode back into the room.

"The nurse says the doctor is on the way," he announced and rubbed his hands together, like someone who had just come in from the cold. He smiled broadly, the bearer of good tidings. "I think we'll be going." Crossing the room to the bed, he began to button his coat. "Take it easy, Dad. We'll see you tomorrow." He dropped a quick kiss on his father's cheek with a little popping noise.

"You got to leave now?"

He and Clare exchanged glances. "We're invited to the Waltman's for dinner. We're late already. You want us to drive you home, Mom?"

"No," Esther replied. "You got your party to go to. I'll go with Irving."

"I'm a sick man," Ben said more loudly.

"Where's your coat, Esther?" Irving glanced around the room.

"In the closet. Such a long day I'm here, it would be a bunch of wrinkles if I didn't hang it up."

"Good night, Dad," said Clare and Eddie together and laughed a little at their chorused goodbye. Eddie grasped his father's hand. "See you

tomorrow."

"God willing," answered Ben in his flat, nasal voice.

Irving stood by the door holding Esther's coat. "I'll tell Bessie you said hello."

The group moved out into the hallway.

"I'm a sick man," Ben called after them, but the elevator clanked open and then shut again. He lay back upon the pillow, plucking peevishly at the sheet, breathing heavily through his mouth, his eyes half-closed.

There was a light touch on his arm, and he raised his eyelids slowly. A brown-skinned woman stood by his side; she wore a white smock and carried a clipboard in her left hand. He shifted his gaze to her other hand, which still rested on his arm. The hand was very dark against his white skin.

"How are you feeling tonight?" she asked, her voice low and gentle.

"Not so good," Ben answered; his eyes teared at the thought of his pain. "My legs is on fire."

She reached for the sheet as if to pull it aside, and Ben clutched it to his waist. "Please, you should tell the nurse I got to see the doctor."

If he isn't here soon, she should tell him I'm getting another doctor."

The woman smiled a little, nodding. Her hair was black and springy, a bush of tiny filaments about her face. "I'm Dr. Norton," she said. "Could I see how the swelling in your legs is?"

"You're a doctor? Where's a regular doctor? Where's Dr. Adelman?"

"He's been called out of town until Monday."

Ben watched weakly while the woman drew back the sheet and pressed her brown fingers against his feet and ankles. Then she covered him briskly and patted his hand. "You get a good night's sleep. We're going to run some tests tomorrow to see if we can't make you more comfortable. We may change your medication."

Ben sat upright in bed, pulling the sheet to his chin. "What kind of tests? What's to test? Who's in charge?"

The woman smiled. Her teeth flashed white in her dark face, and Ben was reminded of Lurina, Esther's shvartzeh who came every Tuesday to clean the house. "Just some x-rays and blood work. You get a good night's sleep and I'll see you tomorrow." She moved towards the door.

"Wait a minute," Ben cried. "How do you know Dr. Adelman?"

"I'm a resident here."

"So?"

"I'm going to be working with Dr. Adelman for a while." She moved into the hall and waved a hand at him before pivoting to the left.

Ben leaned forward in bed. "Tell Dr. Adelman for me," he cried after her in alarm, "you should tell him I'm perfectly satisfied he should always be my doctor. I'm not needing a new doctor."

But the woman was gone. Somewhere down the hall someone coughed loudly in a phlegmatic crescendo. Ben pushed back the sheet and inched his legs over the edge of the bed, giddy and weak with the activity. He felt for the footstool and, finding it, lowered himself gingerly to the cold floor. "Esther," he called, but the sound melted into the dry air. He moved cautiously along the bed, leaning upon it for support, eyeing the door with desperate, rheumy eyes. His nightshirt brushed against his knees, and he shivered. "Help," he cried into the empty room. "Somebody tell the nurse I got to go home." He coughed and his voice subsided to a whisper. "I got to go home right away. I'm a very sick man."

PENELOPE REVISITED

No because I always can tell when hes lying something about his face so froststiff and harsh yes but until now it was always over something that didnt matter much like did he call his mother about coming on Thanksgiving or get the gauge on the car fixed so if he lied and said yes he could get out of the lie by making it true the next day instead of just saying no because I dont blame Bud if he doesnt like to say he forgot but this is different the phone ringing in the middle of the night and no one there when I said hello thinking it was probably my father with another heart attack or something terrible then just that white silent nothing white static and click after a while with him saying so sleepy and innocent who was it oh just another one of those funny calls thats all I said but I knew it was a woman because that Saturday when I was napping on the bed and Gordon answered and

said Daddy isnt here now so I got up and took the phone it might have been a business call except it was that white static again who was it Gordon his face like a butterfluff roll skin so soft will he look like Bud when hes forty what did they say Gordon she said is your daddy there she who she she she was trying to sneak in a call while I napped still weak from pneumonia and if Bud hadnt gone to buy a furnace filter he would have answered that call himself a new filter for the furnace he said but probably went to find a phone booth because I know for sure after seeing that phone bill that she wasnt the only one making little calls no not when I saw those charges to Omaha two yes three times a day might have thought they were business calls but no not at ten oclock at night eleven oclock maybe while I was in the shower or downstairs picking up after Gordon some calls less than a minute only forty or fifty seconds what does a person say in forty seconds I love you I love you too is your wife there no she wouldnt ask because what difference did it make to her except last month when we were in New York and then she said is she there and he said yes and I put the phone in the bathroom down so fast like letting go a dead mouse never thinking of Susie never

thinking Susie might be in New York too no not suspicious like he said just putting the phone down so fast but they must not have heard or maybe forgot about the bathroom phone most hotels dont have them no they had to hear but he said yes yes yes in that sweet way he used to have with me are you my big boy yes hold me here where here yes yes yes but not since when did we do it no not last month always asleep when I got to bed doughy when I touched him maybe in October probably pretending I was her even if she is so tiny but in the dark you can pretend anything yes I came from the bathroom and saw him propped up on the bed my pillow wadded under his neck still holding the phone who called Bud just a business call from Wein and Moore marble tables and tufted leather couches in their offices no not thinking of Susie then no maybe a secretary the way he was working every night in New York tied up he said which is one way of putting it tied up on the leather couch sweaty on the couch leather stuck to bare skin or maybe some woman lawyer funny to meet woman lawyers shouldnt be funny might have been one myself but stuck at home with the vacuum and the washing machine stuck but better now with Gordon in school and sitters for vacations and then waiting in La Guardia with the coats

and packages while he went for a paper because the flight was late and seeing him down the concourse on the phone but I didnt ask if he was buying another filter except he knew I saw him and said he called the weather bureau yes the fog is lifting no not much longer now our flight will leave at nine which any fool could see because the flight time was posted there in the boarding area where I sat with our coats and packages but just as he said nine the man changed the sign to ten so then I said lets call that weather bureau again Bud looking up some number his face froststiff dialing while I held the receiver and got a recorded message about the temperature but nothing about La Guardia and our flight time his eyes harsh and dry so I said funny how the weather bureau talks to you for fifteen minutes but I get a recording cloudy with rain in New York temperature forty-five degrees cloudy with rain raining when Gordon was born and I found a pot of red geraniums in my room when they wheeled me back to Mommy and Gordon with all my love no not all his love anymore because I love you I love you too with all her perfumed love in San Francisco last August when I had the sitter and everything but he said too many meetings and better save the sitter and the

money for another time even when I let him know how disappointed I was not to see Chinatown and the cable cars left his heart in San Francisco calling me every night to say how busy he was I miss you do you miss me oh yes oh sure telling me about Buffy someones house in Los Altos where there was a cocktail party and he wished I could see it because the house overlooked the Bay but he was working hard working like in New York but I believed him until the perfume on his clothes and phone calls with nothing but white static hello hello yes yes yes and the phone bill but let me make a phone call to my mother for a few minutes and he says hurry up its long distance which is why I opened the phone bill Friday because I was afraid to see how much my last call cost thinking to pay the bill quick before he saw it but when he came home and saw the envelope ragged at the flap he just took it upstairs to the bedroom and even after I said wheres the phone bill he said he put it with some things to take to the office because there were some business calls on it not nervous or anything lying to me as easily as he might ask whats for dinner or say fix the eggs over easy the way he likes them which is why he bet on Over Easy last spring at the Aksarben track so it was natural

for me to remember running into Susie that day not jealous and suspicious not snooping like he says no because I didnt care when he used to mention her when we first started dating God he was sweet then even with her picture in his scrapbook calling me Pumpkin let me Pumpkin he said and I wondered if he believed no one had ever touched me down there before no not suspicious never wondering if he touched Susie there no because she had married that broker who made a fortune Roger Thompson who you know Buck Thompson hes in the paper all the time but I never read the business page and we even joked about her once a few years ago when he made a business trip to Omaha guess who I ran into who Susie Thompson did you run into her at her house meaning it as a joke even when he said yes because she lives in one of those old mansions on a main street so if she was out in her yard with pots of red geraniums when he drove by why should I care with all my love because he was still sweet then wait a little longer just let me lie in you a little longer but probably pretending I was her since last summer when he saw her again at Aksarben so excited from winning all that money on Over Easy that when he said wait a minute I see an old friend and practically falling down the stairs to get to her

I thought he was excited about the money not introducing me until I stood there like a fool waiting so long I could have lined up at the starting gate with the horses without him noticing because he was so busy talking to her so glad to see her a white bow stuck in her hair and wearing a skirt with a ruffle on the bottom the kind little girls wear to birthday parties still calling herself Susie even though she must be close to forty not Sue or Susan no I mean how many grown men named Donnie or Tommy not many no but she looked like a susie with ruffles at her neck and sleeves and making sure her dimples showed when she smiled although why anyone would want dents in their face and her saying wed have to stop by the house because there was so much to catch up on but no not jealous then I never gave it a thought since Sybil was expecting us for dinner sorry we cant make it we have other plans his eyes harsh what plans you know were having dinner at Sybils and Susie smiling back and forth between her husband and Bud calling them the two men in her life saying she knew Sybil small world lovely person and we would have to make it another time so much catching up to do the two men in her life oh yes just two Im sure after making some calls of my own to Omaha when I saw that bill and

Sybil said maybe Susie cant count any higher catching up not just with Bud no catching up thats a new word for it tied up in New York catching up in Omaha I love you I love you too her husband looks the other way well good for him but all I see is them together hold me hold me here yes yes yes perfume reeking on him when he came home from that meeting last week smirking like someone with candy for a kid smirking and reeking from perfume and no I was not suspicious never thinking of Susie maybe a secretary from New York or a woman lawyer with expensive perfume probably some fancy name Parfum dEden Heaven Scent did he give it to her a scent for your thoughts giving him more than thoughts not just a piece of her mind no a piece on earth giving it to my husband who said once that I smelled like peanut butter common scents laundry bleach and pot roast not Heaven Scent my husband in a cloud of perfume I said you smell like perfume his jaw tight froststiff whats that supposed to mean I dont know why dont you tell me oh you probably smell the air freshener someone sprayed at the meeting because everyone was smoking yes tied up and smoking doing all that catching up where was your meeting Bud it was at the Ramada Inn so when I saw that phone bill and knew whose perfume I had smelled

I called the Ramada Inn yes this is Susie Thompson Mrs Roger Thompson and I lost something in my room at your motel last Wednesday what was your room number Mrs Thompson I dont remember could you look it up one minute please white static silence but no click because the clerk came back and said room 824 what did you lost Mrs Thompson I should have said my husband instead of just hanging up remembering the smell of her perfume Heaven Scent heaven scent against his face him tasting her all over piece on earth at the Ramada Inn whisperwords I love you I love you too here and here yes yes yes his voice not harsh not saying hurry up its long distance that sonofabitch probably grinning afterwards so pleased the same way he looked at me when I said the doctor said I was finally pregnant and then driving to the party Bud saying can I tell people and I said yes but dont just blurt it out work it into the conversation so when someone said that sonofabitch in the White House Bud said Im going to be a father and I laughed so hard at him wanting to tell it so badly sticking it right in on top of that sonofabitch on top of that sonofabitch at the Ramada Inn no when I saw the phone bill I didnt just blurt it out no I said is there anything you want to tell me his face not so stiff

then more soft like Gordons his eyes so steady I could see the little flecks in the left eye saying yeah we got the J and R account how did you know as smooth as if hed just said fix the eggs over easy and then both of us hiking through the woods with Gordon on Saturday the trees icetinseled the air dry and harsh Gordon hitting snow from the bushes with a stick the house ovenstuffy when we got back and asking him is there anything you want to tell me wondering where he had put that phone bill but he didnt answer just shook his head a little watching my face so I said that was a nice hike and no matter what happens Ill remember how we hiked together in the woods today and he dropped his head on my shoulder pressing his eyes against my sweater his breath warm and moist through the wool do you want to talk and he said okay so I said what is Susie Thompsons number doing on our phone bill was it on last months bill and the month before that when you paid the bills while I was weak from the pneumonia his face tight and dry froststiff again the skin around his eyes white like someone in a minstrel show listen Im getting tired of this yes I called her she gave me some tips on the market how easily he lies but I only said theres nothing you did I wont try to understand if youll

just tell me the truth his eyes trying the corners
of the room theres nothing to tell just some tips on
the market its not what youre thinking and hearing
my own voice before I knew I was talking what Im
thinking is that she was at the Ramada Inn last
Wednesday because I called the desk and they said
room 824 so she was in town last Wednesday when you
come home with perfume on you froststiff face Im
getting tired of this all of a sudden you dont trust
me yes he told the truth for once but making it out
to be my fault and not talking to me the rest of the
day going right to sleep that night how could he
sleep when I sat in bed all night watching him breathe
watching the light go gray towards morning with all
my love caught in my throat like a chicken bone and
after the alarm rang and we were getting dressed for
church our Father who art in Heaven Scent hey Father
take a look in this direction and forgive us our
trespasses because youve got your days work cut out
down here I said was she in New York with you in
San Francisco and Bud yanked his shirt on so rough
with his ringers that had touched her what gave you
that crazy idea what makes you so jealous and sus-
picious and later after eating dinner never looking
at each other I said Im going out and if he had asked

where instead of just reading the paper flipping pages over easy I would have said to buy a new furnace filter and calling Sybil from a pay phone at the filling station cigarette butts and mudgrease on the floor smeared like a childs finger painting can you find out if Susie was in New York last month or San Francisco in August wait a minute yes she was because your post card from New York came the same day her picture was in the paper Mrs Thompson at NY gala so it seemed like everyone I knew was in New York but San Francisco no I wouldnt know Sybil its important the last week in August try to find out wait a minute right before school started we took the kids to Peony Park and saw Buck with his kids Susie in Los Altos for a few days with Buffy Newman do you know Buffy widow of the supermarket big wheel no Sybil not Los Altos San Francisco yes a suburb south of San Francisco mudgrease smeared into a question mark Buffy Buffy do you miss me wish you were here to see the house overlooking the Bay still sprawled on the bed with the paper when I got home the smell of cooking in the air pot roast not Heaven Scent little creases on his ear lobe like an old man my Bud for better or for that sonofabitch reading the paper while I died a funny thing happened

to me on the way to the furnace filter I found out that she was in New York last month Bud flipping another page saying who just as smoothly as he might say over easy Susie Thompson thats who arent you going to say anything no theres nothing to say nothing she might have been in Cambodia for all I know because I dont keep track of where she goes oh no of course he doesnt all those phone calls two three times a day hes just getting the weather forecast look at me you sonofabitch the newspaper rattling Ill give you some news about your Dow Jones average its down a thousand points what are you talking about try to make some sense all right oh God lead me not into temptation for better or for worse all right does this make sense Susie was in San Francisco the last week in August a shruglook she might have been she travels quite a bit turning another page of the damned paper okay Bud could we try to work this out please talk to me because if you can just be honest with me I can try to understand but how can I understand when you wont let me no not looking at me yet still tied up catching up on all the news theres nothing to work out where she goes is none of my business okay Bud but I found out she was with Buffy someone in Los Altos remember Los Altos the house on the Bay

what business did you have in San Francisco or is
that none of my business a long silence white static
nothing and him so far away across the room encapsuled
like a voice heard long distance my Pumpkin here yes
Gordons father till death do put red geraniums in me
a little longer the air harsh and dry on icetinselled
trees and him crumpling the Sunday paper the news-
paper Iowa depends upon yeah so she was there just
coincidence no I didnt tell you why make mountains
out of molehills your jealousy and snooping are
ruining things oh God just get me through this day
this minute and I will never ask another thing except
Bud what should I do his face strostiff thats up to
you because since when I have I told you what to do
since when since when since always when he put his
arms around me yes and drew me down to him so he
could feel my breasts all perfume yes and my heart
was going like mad and yes I said I will yes and he
said hurry up its long distance you Pumpkin cutting
out my eyes my veins no I cannot live with lies its
not so much him doing it with her but all the lies but
if he leaves no his empty closet where his blue
suit hangs blue suit of Gordons father is your daddy
there no daddy doesnt live here anymore no never
believe him again no can I forgive oh God yes I would

forgive if he would only say Im sorry instead of
pretending theres nothing to forgive forget that
sonofabitch forgive forget no not forget no never
not forget no never no